



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Jeremiah 14: 7-10, 19-22
Second Reading Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18
Gospel Luke 18: 9-14

Many of you are probably aware of the current crisis in the American Episcopal Church. Since the election of an openly gay bishop for the diocese of New Hampshire, an increasingly vocal minority has been expressing its displeasure not only with that election, but also with a general trend that has been taking place in the American church since the 70's and that is enthusiastically embraced by the leadership in its highest levels. Issues include not only those related to sexuality, but also a wide range of developments away from a more recognizably Anglican position on ethics, theology and, at its foundation, the role of Scripture and Tradition in establishing norms for Christian living. The result of this controversy has been that many parishes and even whole dioceses are in the process of realigning themselves- leaving the jurisdiction of the Episcopal Church U.S.A. and becoming affiliated with more conservative provinces of the Anglican Church, primarily in Africa. The result is a patchwork quilt of jurisdictions and loyalties that makes a mockery of the unity of Christ's Body on earth, but which also represents men and women taking their beliefs seriously enough to risk schism rather than betray them. We're not yet sure just how this will work out, or how it will affect us here in the Philippines.

In the course of these battles, one of the problems has been names. What does one call oneself if he or she wants to not only make clear what the ideals are, but also to

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win over others to his or her side? For example, those who embrace the new way of doing things are often called "liberals." Those who want to keep things the way they are might be called "conservatives." However, "progressive" is another term used for the first group, and "traditionalist" is sometimes used for the second. Each of these terms has both a positive and a negative connotation. For instance, "liberals" sounds, well, liberating and free to some, but irresponsible to others. "Traditionalists" think that they are passing on the core beliefs and values of a timeless Christianity, while others think the term means unchanging, closed-minded and cold-hearted.

What these terms reveal is that for every title, slogan or label a group may want to adopt, there is an opposite, negative term that develops for its opponents. If one is liberal, it must be opposed to those who are conservative, it is reasoned. If one is progressive, that must mean that those who disagree are not-progressive and stuck in their ways. You see how it goes. A group developed about twenty years ago in the Anglican Church to champion those who appreciated the old High Church liturgies and customs, but who also embraced the new liberal positions on sexuality and gender. They called themselves "Affirming Catholics". That sounded grand, but it also meant that those didn't jump on their particular bandwagon seemed doomed to be "unaffirming"- a very negative-sounding thing.

Human beings seem to be unable to find definition and worth in themselves without comparing themselves to others. What is rich if there is no poor? What is generous if there is no selfish? Even more basically: what is good if there is no bad?

Today's Gospel with its story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Temple is a good case in point of the dangers of comparisons. Jesus knows human nature very well- as John says in his Gospel: "he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone." (2:24-5) His story, then, is a warning to us about how uninformed our comparisons can be.

The Pharisee's prayer is actually rather tame. He doesn't ask anything for himself- in fact he is basically giving thanks to God for the blessing of being himself and for being spared the fate of those less fortunate. We may snicker at how he begins,

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people,” but how many times have we ourselves spoken or thought the phrase, “there but for the grace of God, go I.” Yes, God’s grace is bountiful and forgiving, but thanking Him for not being like others automatically puts a person on the personal pedestal of self-satisfaction. And that is a dangerous place to be. All of the things that the Pharisee says he does are good and profitable: a very traditional, proper balance of personal devotion and generous outreach. No rabbi or priest could fault him. Where he falls down is in comparing himself to the tax collector nearby. The Pharisee presumes that such a man must be a real hypocrite to show up in the Temple. As a tax collector, he must be a collaborator with the Roman occupation and most probably taking some for himself on the side. His life, and therefore his devotion, must be flawed, thinks the Pharisee. “Thank God I’m not that bad.”

Jesus then shows us what is really going on in the mind and heart of this presumed collaborator and tax cheat. What we hear is a pathetic cry for help- a prayer so simple and heart-felt that it has become a standard Christian devotion for many millions of believers: “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” No comparisons, here- the tax collector makes no attempt to rate his piety against anyone else’s- indeed, he doesn’t even dare to look up while he prays it. And this is the man, Jesus tells us, who goes home “justified”. In other words, God recognizes him as someone on the right path towards salvation.

What Our Lord is telling us here is not just a story about two others, but a warning to ourselves not to base our sense of spiritual progress on others. What is in our minds and our hearts when we pray to God? Does our sense of worth in God’s sight come from what we have done, and particularly from what others have not done? Do we enjoy using titles not only to define ourselves but to put down others? Do we force a division between Catholic and Christian, as is so often incorrectly done here in the Philippines? Do we feel proud that we are “born again”, or “filled with the Spirit”, not because of how it brings us closer to God, but because of how it sets us above all those others who aren’t? These are the things that Christ is conveying to us today as he tells us, “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

So we must be very careful how we pray. It's not only what we pray for that is important, but the attitude we have both towards God and towards each other. It's not "there but for the Grace of God am I," but rather, "Here with the grace of God am I right now."