

## 2019 30<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY

The Pharisee's biggest mistake was to say: "I thank You, God, that I am not like the rest of mankind."

If the Pharisee had ever reflected on the very first story in the Old Testament- the story of Adam and Eve- who symbolise all of humanity- he would have known that all people- himself included- are born with an inbuilt inclination to see ourselves as the centre of the Universe. We all yearn to be admired, to be acknowledged as somewhat superior to everyone else. And we all rebel against authority when it seems to be restricting our freedom to do whatever we like.

The sin of Adam and Eve- we call it the Original Sin- was to eat the forbidden fruit as a sign of their rebellion against God's authority.

That first story of the Bible tells us that right from the beginning, human persons have been obsessed with doing whatever gives them prestige, whatever makes them wealthy and whatever gives them pleasure- regardless of what they know to be the Will of God.

That day in the Temple, the Pharisee pointed contemptuously to a tax collector who was humbly begging God's mercy- and scornfully proclaimed that he, the Pharisee, had no need to do that because he was ever-so virtuous.

Jesus shook His head with sorrow. Because the Pharisee had a huge blind spot. In actual fact he had every reason to beg for God's mercy because in seeing himself as being a cut above everybody else in society, he was doing exactly what Adam and Eve had done- he was putting himself equal to God.

It was the sin the Church links with a 4<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish theologian, called Pelagius. Pelagius taught that a person could become a saint without God's help. All a person needed to become holy was a strong will and lots and lots of determination.

The Church, led by such great theologians as St. Augustine and St. Jerome, opposed Pelagius. They taught that there is a fundamental selfishness within every person which makes it impossible for any person to be holy until they admit their helplessness and call on God's assisting graces.

In the parable the Pharisee is Pelagius. He is striving for holiness under his own strength. Through fasting and giving money to the Temple, he believes that he will become ever holier and holier.

The tax-collector, on the other hand, has no trust in his own strength and calls out to God: “God be merciful to me. Help me. I am a sinner. I am weak.”

Jesus makes it very clear that the path the tax-collector is following is the path to holiness. The path of the Pharisee is a path to nowhere.

“Everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled. Those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The wise person will acknowledge that any spiritual talents they may have are gifts from God and are not reasons for self-glorification.

Mary was very conscious that the baby she carried in her womb was destined to be the Messiah. She knew that He would be the Saviour of the World. Her cousin St Elizabeth said to her “Blessed are you above all women.”

Mary, quite rightly, did not dispute the fact that she was privileged above all women ever to be born. But she responded in her beautiful song which we call the Magnificate: “God has chosen me, His handmaid, because of my lowliness”.

For Mary knew that when there is important work to be done in the world, God inevitably calls on the lowly to do this work. This makes it very clear that what has been accomplished has been done through God’s grace, not through human cleverness.

St Francis de Sales wrote: “We must cast aside the comfort of being self-sufficient. We must quell our reassuring self-confidence and our abounding self-love. We must rely rather on God. We must surrender all to God.”

We all know that being a Catholic is challenging. The reality is that we are not able to live out our Faith under our own steam. We need God’s help. We must continually ask the Holy Spirit to renew in us those Gifts we received when we were confirmed.

But the key for all of us is coming to Mass. The Eucharist is the food God gives to strengthen us on our journey through life. When we come to Mass we do as the tax collector did. Right at the very beginning, we confess that we are sinners and call out to God for mercy and help.

And then throughout the Mass, God responds to our plea with wonderful graces; most especially at Holy Communion; our Food for the Journey. Not to receive Holy Communion frequently is to be like the Pharisee- it is to say that we can be saints without God’s help; which is straight pelagianism.

