

Readings

Sir 35:12-14, 16-18

Ps 34:2-3, 17-18, 19, 23

2 Tm 4:6-8, 16-18

Lk 18:9-14

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Jesus was in the last year of his life and his battle with the leaders of the people, the Pharisees, was soon to end. They would have him executed and that would be that. Now in the last months of his life Jesus was concerned lest his followers continue to believe that the proud life-style of the Pharisees was to be the Christian Ideal. To make his point he told the crowds a story, an event that was not unfamiliar to any of them who had ever visited the central place of prayer in Israel ... the great temple in Jerusalem.

Two men (he said) went up to the temple to pray. The one was a Pharisee dressed in the impressive uniform of his clan ... the little boxes (phylacteries) on his forehead and arms containing his profession of faith, the cloak edged with tassels of two colors indicating the wearer was a strict observer of the law. As he passed through the crowds he accepted the respectful greetings of the crowd with a condescending nod, careful not to be tarnished by too intimate a contact with the sin-filled horde.

The other man was a tax-collector. He was dressed in simple clothes. His profession made him hated by the people and he had learned the advantages of invisibility.

In the temple the Pharisee got as close to the Sanctuary as the law allowed and there began a loud conversation with God ... a dialogue between equals ... in which he outlined how good a person he was and how thankful he was (and God should be) that such a noble creature existed. "Give

thanks, God (he said) that I am not like the rest of the human race ... disreputable and dirty. I observe the law exactly, careful about every external observance that we Pharisees have created over the years. I am not like that sin-filled Publican back there and you can give thanks for that, God.”

The Publican, of course could not hear the Pharisee's prayer for he was standing at the very back of the temple, far, far away from the Holy of Holies. He prayed in a whisper, saying only these words: “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

Jesus continued:

“That Publican was closer to God than the Pharisee because the Pharisee thought that he was God. If you think that you are better than the rest of the human race, you are pretending to be God because God alone is greater than the human race. When a person makes himself into a God then the real God leaves him, because in one human or in this one and only world there is room for only one God. And so, don't pretend to be more than you can be. To be a decent human being is quite enough. God will come and live in you then even though you are slightly cracked.”