

Commentary to the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)



The Lord Hears the Cry of the Abandoned

Paul, the intense and dynamic fighter for the Lord, was left alone. He had returned to Jerusalem to consult with the twelve original apostles. He had gone to the Temple to pray. Then those who were fighting against this new Jewish sect now called Christians saw Paul and told the crowd that this is the man who is preaching blasphemy. They began beating him. Paul was rescued by the Romans. They had to carry him over the crowd to keep him alive. Paul was then brought before Claudius Lysias, the Roman Tribune. Ananias the high priest came to demand Paul's death. Forty of the Jews vowed to neither eat nor drink until Paul was put to death. And Paul was left all alone.

This is what Paul is speaking of in today's second reading from the Second Letter to Timothy. "At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen." Alone and helpless Paul cried out for help and was heard.

"The Lord hears the cry of the oppressed. He is not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow

when she pours out her complaint. He who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens. The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal, Nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds, judges justly and affirms the right." That's from our first reading from the Book of Sirach.

The orphan, the widow, the abandoned cry out to God. And he hears. And he responds.

The tax collector in the parable in today's Gospel suffered from the loneliness caused by his sins. That is what sin does, you know. It causes us to be alone in the mud of our lives, like the Prodigal Son, alone in the slop of the pigsty. But back to the tax collector. He worked for Rome, collecting money from his own people. He was a thief, demanding from the Jews more than the Romans would demand he return to them. He used the Roman guards as his means of enforcing his arbitrary decisions. The tax collector had many things. He was rich. But he was alone. He had no friends other than other tax collectors, people as despicable as he was. His own countrymen hated him. His family was embarrassed by his wealth and probably wanted nothing to do with him. He hated himself. Surely God must hate him. So he slipped into the Temple and sincerely sought God's forgiveness. And God heard the cries of this abandoned one.

Now the Pharisee comes to the Temple, not to cry out for help, but to remind God of his goodness. He fasts. He pays tithes. He reminds God that he is not like so many others who are grasping and crooked and adulterous. The Pharisee has no sense of dependence on God. He is so full of himself that he doesn't recognize his own emptiness. He does not have enough sense to ask God to help him be a better person. He thinks he has everything. He leaves the Temple with nothing.

The Pharisee sinned because he did not recognize his dependence on God. Paul in the second reading, the orphan and widow in the first reading, the tax collector in the parable, all are alone; Paul due to others lacking courage to support him in court, the widow and orphan due to the sad events of life, and the tax collector suffering the isolation caused by his sins. They recognized their need for God. They ask God to fill their emptiness. They are justified, raised up to God by his gratuitous mercy.

And so we come to Church today seeking God's Presence to fill our emptiness. We recognize how our sins have left us isolated in our worlds. We have lost close friends because we have not been able to control our tongues. We have destroyed relationships when we have allowed fantasy to be confused with reality. We have not loved as we could love because we have tried loving ourselves instead of others. As a result there are times that we don't even like ourselves, let alone love ourselves. So we come before the Lord, alone, abandoned by some whom we love, perhaps abandoned by our own self

esteem. And we ask the Lord to hear our cries.

Or perhaps we have done our best to serve God, to live as committed Catholics and, as a result, we have lost friends. We stay away from the parties and people who would destroy our essence, our spiritual life. This has cost us. We are laughed at, scorned, avoided and excluded by the so-called in crowd, the popular kids at school, at work or in the neighborhood. We come to Church today, and we ask the Lord to hear our cries.

And He does hear us. And He responds with the greatest gift there is. He calls to us on the cross and asks, "Do you think that you are the first person to feel abandoned?" He responds with His Presence. He tells us to believe that He is with us, Emmanuel, God with his people. He fills up our emptiness. He helps us to love others by helping us see His presence in them. He helps us to love ourselves by helping us see the capacity we have to reflect His Image to the world. He gives our lives meaning.

We are not alone. We have the Lord, and He has us. He is with each of us as individuals, and all of us as His family. Yes, we know the abandonment that our sins have caused, but we are filled with the Divine Presence among us and within us. We are hungry, and here we are fed. Our prayer today is the Pilgrim's prayer, the Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner. Lord Jesus, Have mercy on me a sinner. Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner." And throughout the pilgrimage of our lives, we cry out, "I am not worthy to be in your presence Lord, but I need you too much to leave."

The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal.

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