

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Mar 9th 2024

Worship God and not the self

“God, I thank you”. This is a great beginning for prayer because gratitude is the best prayer. Immediately, though, we see the reason why the Pharisee gives thanks: “that I am not like other men” (Lk 18:11).

Pharisaism is not about a particular people or a particular religious tradition. It’s the human condition that infects all people and all religious traditions. It is real today as it was in Jesus’ times. It deceives us into trusting in ourselves and seeing ourselves as righteous while looking at others with contempt. When I play the Pharisee, the only right way is always my way, or the way of my country, the way of my religion, the way of my church.

Pharisaism is the mother of profiling or labelling, be it on the basis of race, gender or religion. Profiling happens when I look at the appearance, accent, lifestyle or life choices, faith, beliefs and practices of another human being and make conclusions and judgments about their value, dignity, motives and desires, intelligence and abilities, holiness and goodness.

Those conclusions and judgments are always in my favour and against the other. This is what the Pharisee does to the tax collector in today’s gospel. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income to the temple.” He boasts because he fulfils particular commandments but forgets the greatest commandment: to love God and our neighbour.

The tragedy of this man is that he is without love. Without love, he ends up praising himself instead of praying. In fact, he asks nothing from the Lord because he does not feel needy or in debt, but he feels that God owes something to him. He stands in the temple of God, but he worships a different god: himself. And many “prestigious” groups, “Catholic - Christians”, go along this path.

For the Pharisee, his neighbour has no worth, no value. He considers himself better than others. They are “leftovers”; they are scraps from which they prefer to keep a distance.

How many times do we see this happening in life and history? The true worship of God is always expressed in the love of one’s neighbour. Let us examine ourselves and see whether we, too, may think that someone is inferior and can be tossed aside, even if only in our words. Let us pray for the grace not to consider ourselves superior, not to believe that we are better than others. Let us ask Jesus to heal us from speaking ill of and complaining about others. Because these things are displeasing to God.