

20th Sunday of Year--Cycle  
(Sir 35:12-14,16-18; 2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14)

If I had to decide which of today's three readings is the most beautiful, I would have to say "the first." There is something most attractive about Sirach's description of the poor widow's prayer piercing the clouds to throne of God, where it remains till God deals with it.

Sirach, one of the so-called Wisdom books, is a long one which deals with many matters: use of speech, choice and treatment of friends, raising of daughters, lending money, and many, many others, but he is smack in the wisdom tradition in his concern for the poor. The wisdom tradition grew out of scribal circles, circles of those learning to read and write, who were generally destined for high positions in the royal court. There was no legal tradition for Israel (lawyers and judges and such); the king was responsible for judgement, but in practice it was mainly in the hands of court officials, so administration of justice was also part of their training. and it is surprising and heart-warming to see how concerned this tradition was for the poor and others whose rights were likely to be trampled on. In the Book of Proverbs, for example, we hear: "He who oppresses the poor blasphemes his maker"; "He who has compassion on the poor lends to the Lord"; "He who shuts his ear to the poor will himself also call and not be heard"; "Injure not the poor because they are poor, nor crush the needy at the gate; For the Lord will defend their cause, and will plunder the lives of those who plunder

them." And we find the same sort of thing in wisdom circles outside Israel. For example, an Egyptian instruction: "Do not recognize a widow if thou catchest her in thy field, nor fail to be indulgent to her reply. God desires respect for the poor more than the honoring of the exalted."

Thus we can understand the prophets when they excoriate officials for not remembering and acting on these things in administering justice. For example, Isaiah when he says: "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who change darkness into light, and light into darkness, who change bitter into sweet, and sweet into bitter--to those who acquit the guilty for bribes, and deprive the just man of his rights." These officials are guilty of hypocrisy: they occupy positions of authority because of their training but then do things contrary to their training. Isaiah says of such that they "are wise in their own sight, and prudent in their own esteem."

All of this is relevant to today's gospel with Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. These two form an obvious contrast, for a number of reasons. The Pharisee himself begins by claiming the contrast: "I thank you that I am not like other men" and then singles out the tax collector as an example. There is contrast in where they stand, their postures, in what they say. But the most important contrast is the one Jesus Himself declares: the one goes home justified and the other does not.

One failing Jesus cannot abide is hypocrisy. He is gentle with the sinful woman who wept at His feet; He is

gentle with the woman taken in adultery. In that case, in fact, He delivers her by uncovering the hypocrisy of her accusers. He does this by the simple expedient of saying, "Let the one among you is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her."

On the other hand He saves His harshest condemnation for the Pharisees. "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" They fault the disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath, and they fault Jesus for eating with unwashed hands. Jesus accuses them: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You cleanse the outside of cup and dish, but inside they are full of plunder and self-indulgence.... Cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean." He accuses them of being white-washed tombs--beautiful on the outside but full bones and every kind of filth.

A large part of their problem is that they did not distinguish between the important and unimportant. In fact it was part of the rabbinic tradition not to distinguish between the lighter and weightier things: everything in the Law was important because it *was* the Law. So Jesus could rightly accuse them of "straining out a gnat but swallowing down a camel." Because they observed the law with all its minutiae, they thought they could sit in judgment on others who did not.

Our Pharisee of today's parable brags that he fasts twice a week and pays tithes on his whole income. Jesus says: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You pay tithes of mint and dill and cummin, and have

neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity." There are many excellent things in the law: for example, one is not to oppress an alien, one should not wrong a widow or orphan, one should not exact interest on loans; the poor are to be allowed to glean in the fields, you are to help even an enemy, one who hates you, whose donkey has fallen under its load, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Presumably these are some of the "weightier things"--"judgment and mercy and fidelity"--that Jesus says they have neglect.

We ought to be more like the Tax Collector than the Pharisee. But are we? We who are professed religious are in the greater danger. We have publicly embraced a life of perfection by our religious profession, we wear habits to externalize that state, and worst of all, some people out there seem to think we are holy. Well, don't pay any attention to those people. We are what we are and that's it. Again St. Benedict admonishes us not want to be thought holy until we truly are. And any time I THINK I'm holy, I KNOW I'm not!

For the others, the surest sign of being a Pharisee is to be judgmental of others--because they're clothes are too flashy or too dowdy, because the skirt is too short or too long, because they take Communion in the hand instead of in the mouth, or vice versa? Do we judge the homeless man a deadbeat? It's a very tricky business. The other day Pope Francis warned against becoming ideologues. "Ideologies are rigid; there is not Jesus in His tenderness,

His love, His meekness. When a Christian becomes a disciple of the ideology, he has lost the faith, he is no longer a disciple of Jesus." Yet the ideologue believes it is precisely his ideology that guarantees that he is good, holy. He has become a Pharisee. Our only safe course is to have the attitude of the Tax Collector and say always, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."