

26th SUNDAY YEAR. A September 28, 2020 (edited)

When I was at St. David's parish in Wales Fr. Luke the pastor asked me to attend to a family who wanted to arrange for a funeral for a sister. They told me that she was like a lost sheep of the family. She had not been practicing her Catholic faith for years. She had lived a long time among a fringe group of street people and drug addicts. I was told it would have to be a short ceremony at the Crematorium, not a funeral Mass in the church.

I agreed. When family and friends gathered for the service, I was somewhat taken aback at how many men as well as women had ear rings, nose rings, visible tattoos, dyed hair of all colors, black leather suits and other odd outfits. Since the time of the service was limited, I spoke very briefly. Then one of her friends asked if he could speak about her. It was quite moving to hear how caring and generous she was among them. They really would miss her. In spite of that, at the gathering outside after the service I stood somewhat aside as family members spoke with some of the deceased's friends.

That experience brought home to me poignantly what Jesus said in the gospel: Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom before you do. How easy to misjudge other people living different life styles from my own and what I consider the proper way to live.

In Matthew's gospel just before today's excerpt of parable of the two sons, those same priests and elders questioned Jesus about his authority to do the things he. Some had seen him cleansing the temple driving out the money changers. In retort Jesus asks them what they thought of John's preaching. Was he inspired, authorized by God, to do that or not? John was calling people to repentance and baptism as a ritual cleansing sign that they wanted to change their lives. The priests and elders were afraid to answer Jesus one way or another for its implications on their reputation. So they said that they did not know. Jesus said, OK, then I am not going to tell you by what authority I do what I do.

Today's gospel reading isn't the only occasion where Jesus makes his point about God's judgments that can be different from ours. In Luke's gospel we read the parable about the Pharisee and tax collector who went up to the temple to pray (Lk 18: 9 ff.). The Pharisee thanked God for helping him to be righteous, observant of the law along with his fasting, prayer and almsgiving. In the back of his mind he was thinking, I am glad I am not like that man at the back. Meanwhile the tax collector at the back was begging God for mercy because he knew he was a sinner.

The Jewish historian of the first century, Josephus, described Pharisees as “a certain sect of the Jews that appear more religious than others, and seem to interpret the laws more accurately.” Notice he said that they appeared to be more religious than others. God’s ways are different from our ways. When God sent the seer Samuel to find one of Jesse’s son to anoint in place of King Saul, God told him: “Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart.”

That is why Jesus tell us not to do things to earn praises and admiration from fellow men and women. When you pray go pray in secret, don’t let your left hand know what alms your right hand are giving, and have a joyful face when you are fasting. Even doing that salvation is not our own doing. It is God’s gift and dependent on our motives for ascetical practices.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “If I have faith enough to move mountains If I give everything I have to feed the poor and hand over my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” (1 Cor 13). Love is the work of the heart. Salvation depends on God’s gifts and a clean heart open to receive them. So we pray with the psalmist, Create a clean heart for me, O God. Put a new spirit within me.

All things are possible for God. Especially when our Creator has such pity for our weak sinful state that he sends his Son to show us the way of return to his blessed embrace. Jesus came and emptied himself and took the form of a slave being born in the likeness of men. He humbled himself, obediently accepting even death on a cross! He is our model for being humble and obedient to God’s will whatever the cost.

We are the beneficiaries of his self-emptying in becoming man, his dying for our sins and rising. Going ahead he has left us the cleansing waters of baptism, the confirming oil of the Spirit, and his body and blood as an acceptable sacrifice pleasing to God. Let us turn now to the altar to participate in that acceptable offering, where we are taught by the Word through the Holy Spirit and can eat the bread of life to sustain us as we journey toward life on high with Christ Jesus.

To our Merciful Father, his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit be praise, honor, glory, thanksgiving and loving obedience now and forever.

