

## TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – 10/1/17

My dear people of God:

I find so much consolation in today's Responsorial Psalm that it is so easy for me to use it as the springboard of our reflection on this twenty-sixth Sunday of the Ordinary Time: "*Remember your mercies, O Lord.*"

Whether we have been recently touched and forgiven by God, or we have been consistently following His commands and imitating His Son, today's responsorial psalm is of paramount influence in our lives.

So paramount that we could immediately relate and identify with the two characters in the first reading:

- (1) *the penitent sinner is dealt with according to his new obedience, not according to his former sins.*
- (2) *The righteous man who turns from righteousness to sin shall be punished for the latter, and his former righteousness will be of no avail to him.*

We know that God invites every man into leading a tranquil life by holding out hope. We have Saint Paul to guide us to understand more profoundly this part of Ezekiel: He says in his first letter to Timothy, chapter 2, verse 4, ". . . **God wills everyone to be saved . . .**". As a matter of fact, verses 1 to 5 of the same chapter would be a good side lesson to our second reading which Paul wrote to the Philippians.

Again, we could learn from John's gospel *that the Lord is willing to save us, if only we come to Him* (John 5:40). But we also know that *if we put into mockery the mercy of God, there can be no hope for us; even mercy is against us* (Letter to Hebrews 10:26-29). How beneficial it would be if we live by the will of God, and, inversely, how big a the loss to our soul it would be, if we distance ourselves from God. We know that "the way of the Lord is equal". It is our way that is unequal and we know that we cannot invoke the law with dirty hands.

It is worth noting that the second letter of Peter (2 Peter 2:20-22), gives us a stern and graphic warning. While condemning false teachers, he says: "*If they have*

*escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit, and, "A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud."*

Those alone are true saints who by the grace of God persevere: Matthew 24:13; 1 Corinthians 10:12; John 10:28; and John 10:29

Now, let us take a look at the second reading. I quoted Saint Paul in my comment on the first reading. It is God's desire that we be saved. But we must focus on the model: Jesus Christ.

There is a great temptation here to focus on the subject of the self-emptying of Christ, and not on the theme of why must we become humble and not power-hungry. We will not reflect on what theologians call the KENOSIS (or self-emptying) of Christ this time. Please know that there is another day in the Liturgical Calendar devoted to that. We will focus in His Servanthood.

On this 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Ordinary Time, we will focus solely on the reason why we must imitate Christ who understood that EQUALITY with GOD was something that was inherent to Himself in His Preexistence; but He did not consider Godlikeness to consist in "*grasping*" or "*seizing*" or *as "grasping it to His own advantage,"* which would be the normal expectation of lordly power and worldly power: NO, far from it. We are talking about a Servant-King, Despite Being a GOD.

Christ's selflessness for the sake of others is expressed in His emptying Himself by taking the "*form*" of a slave. We understand that the ultimate PARADIGM of a genuinely Christian mindset is CHRIST HIMSELF, who is the premier manifestation of the character of God, which God is trying to reproduce in His people so that they might also thereby be truly human. Paul thus presents the essential matters of Christ's story, from Incarnation till Ascension. All of these happened because of His desire to serve.

Our model for humble service is Jesus. And our salvation/condemnation is based on how closely we have imitated Jesus. The main reason why this part of the

letter to the Philippians is made as our second reading is this: that we may focus on Christ Himself, and thus to point to Him as the ultimate model of the self-sacrificing love to which Paul is calling the Philippians and us.

The "what" and the "why" of Paul's declaration in Philippians 1:21: "*for to me, to live is Christ*" are clear to us now. In Jesus Christ the true nature of the living God has been revealed ultimately and finally. God is not a grasping, self-centered being. He is most truly known through the One whose equality with God found expression in His pouring Himself out in sacrificial love by taking the lowest place, the role of a slave, and whose love for his human creatures found consummate expression in his death on the cross. That this is God's *own nature and doing has been attested for all time by Christ Jesus' divine vindication; He has been exalted by God to the highest place by having been given the Name: the Lord (Kyrios) is none other than Jesus Christ. This is why for Paul "to live is Christ."* Any faith that falls short of this is simply not the Christian faith.

With your indulgence, I wish to call today's four-verse parable "*The Better of Two Bad Sons*". The meaning is clear.

The first son, who said no to his father but who went and did what his father wanted, is a type for us sinners. When we encounter the forgiving Jesus, we change our lives. This son stands for us, the "outsiders;" including Gentiles, who had been accustomed to saying "No" to God but, having been chastened by their experience of sinfulness, responded positively to the challenge of Jesus. At this point, it would be good to recall my comments on the first reading.

These outsiders, who were joined by gentiles, the "tax collectors and prostitutes" who, though despised by the religious types of that time, were more humble and therefore more open to the message of Jesus. The point is that pride and smugness are far greater obstacles to true conversion than a sinful past ripe for repentance.

The second son who says yes to the father but does not deliver his YES, represents the religious authorities of the day who were long on words but short on deeds. When the Son of God came in the person of Christ, they were anxious to terminate Him. In the final roundup, it is only by deeds that we prove who we are.

We Catholics have developed elaborate rituals and clear moral guidelines to help us to establish and maintain a good and fruitful relationship with God. This is surely a responsible and praiseworthy provision since it is so easy to lose one's

balance in matters of religion. But when our relationship with God is reduced primarily to observing rituals and keeping rules, we need to take a serious look at our personal relationship with God and our daily conversion. The Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day certainly appeared more religious than the tax collectors and prostitutes. However, their strict observance covered and plastered a deep and fatal flaw, which was self-righteousness, expressed most often in rash judgment.

Please know that Jesus is not suggesting that we ought to despise ritual and disregard moral codes. But it is just as obvious that He not only wants us to say the right things (like the first son), but also to act in a way that benefits others (like the second son). This will happen only when we are truly converted from selfish ways and become exemplary in tolerance, compassion and forgiveness.

Sometimes people are repelled by a religious observance that has no depth and is in fact accompanied by questionable behavior. However, if they look a bit more closely, they will see that there are also observant believers whose behavior is perfectly in harmony with their faith.

Brothers and sisters: What matters is our final state before God. And you can count on this: God's way is perfectly and mercifully fair. This Sunday's Gospel has a message similar to last Sunday: What counts is our final state. Jesus teaches that what matters is not how long a person has worked in the vineyard, but whether he's at work in the vineyard at the end of the day. Today we hear that a person might say "yes" to God and later lose his soul by disobedience. On the other hand a person might say "no" to God, but later save his soul by an act of obedience. Ezekiel will remind us: "Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?" (Ezekiel 18:25)

May God bless us always.