

GOD IS KING - THOSE WHO RECOGNIZE THEIR NEED FOR GOD WILL GET GOD

In this Sunday's gospel we are invited to answer the following question: Why was the tax collector's prayer better than the Pharisee's prayer? For me the answer is quite simple. The tax collector made a true connection with God, but the Pharisee only made a connection with himself. Tax collectors were despised by the Jewish community in Palestine. They were Jews who collaborated with the occupying Roman forces by collecting taxes from fellow Jews. They often collected more than the law required and lined their pockets with the extra money. The Pharisees on the other hand, were just the opposite. They were the most respected members of the Jewish community, the elite, the undisputed religious leaders of the nation. Yet, Jesus praises the tax collector's prayer and criticizes the Pharisee's prayer. Through the centuries, the tax collector's simple prayer, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner," has been taken up as a complete summary of Christian spirituality. There are even cases of monks who made this prayer the only words that they spoke and reached heights of sanctity by means of it. Why? Because this prayer makes a connection with God because it recognizes two things. First, it acknowledges God's greatest quality in relation to fallen mankind, his mercy. The word "mercy" comes from the Latin "misericors: miser (wretched, miserable) + cor (heart)". Literally, it means to take someone else's wretchedness into one's heart. This is what God does with us. Second, the tax collector's prayer recognizes his need for this mercy. He accuses himself of being a sinner, someone who has selfishly abused God's gifts using them only for himself. The Pharisee's prayer shows no knowledge either of God's mercy or of his need for God; rather, it is an exercise in self-love and self-admiration. God wants to connect with each of us, but he can only do so if we let him, and we can't let him if we don't really think we need him.

God bless,
Deacon John