

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; Ps 34 (33); 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Two men went up to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector

Luke 18:9 Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading (unique to Luke) is a direct continuation of last Sunday’s Gospel, really on the same theme of prayer. Luke often works with pairs of stories. The focus shifts, however, from persistence to humility, from disciples to Pharisees. Humility probably isn’t a great word today—even though it really means being down to earth (and not, of course, humiliation or low self-esteem).

Christian readers can find it difficult to identify with the Pharisee, always somehow “one of them” rather than “one of us.” But of course, the parable is not about them but about us truly. Even a good moral life can become a false basis for relating to God. Even prayer can become a matter of boasting.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a didactic parable, in the sense that there is no puzzle, but a plain contrast, the meaning of which is hard to miss.



OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the Hebrew Bible, humility as self-effacement etc. rarely appears. The word set mostly refers to the poor and the oppressed. However, there are exceptions.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Dt 8:2–3)

For you deliver a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down. (Psalms 18:27)

For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isaiah 57:15)

Thought for the day

Humility, humiliation, low self-esteem: these things get all mixed up in our minds and in our feelings. In the past, humility was encouraged by humiliation—really an abuse, which must have caused much harm. Low self-esteem—the root of many problems and addictions—used to be confused with humility. A robust humility is really an exercise in truth-telling about ourselves. If we are to be grounded in the *humus* (earth) of our *human* existences, then we do need to be honest in our appraisal, affirming the good and recognising courageously our faults. Humility goes with being human.

Prayer

As we affirm your gifts and rejoice in them, help us to honest and know the full story, warts and all, that we come before you in need of your grace.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly (Luke 1:52)

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20)

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11)

ST PAUL

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:1–8)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 9 The lines are clearly drawn from the start. Verse 9 is surely a Lucan editorial comment. We are to imagine an audience of Pharisees, here portrayed as an élitist group who look down on “the rest.” Contrast: Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. (2Corinthians 1:9) Righteous is inverted commas, as we will discover.

Verse 10 The mention of two men will trigger a memory in the attentive reader the two brothers in Luke 15. The temple is always important in Luke Acts (in case you need proof: Luke 2:27, 37, 46; 4:9; 18:10; 19:45, 47; 20:1; 21:5, 37–38; 22:4, 52–53; 23:45; 24:53; Acts 2:46; 3:1–3, 8, 10; 4:1; 5:20–22, 24–26, 42; 14:13; 19:27, 35, 37; 21:26–30; 22:17; 24:6, 12, 18; 25:8; 26:21!).

In the Lucan narrative, tax gathers are consistently portrayed as open to the word of the prophet and hence to conversion (7:29, 3:12; 5:27, 29, 30; 7:34; 15:1). By contrast, the Pharisees are always closed.

Verse 11 The Jerusalem Bible translates “he said this prayer to himself.” There is even further ambiguity in the Greek: (i) he prayed quietly; (ii) he prayed to himself instead of God; (iii) he prayed with reference to himself. The ambiguity is unsettling and intentional. The NRSV misses the point somewhat. The NET plumbs for option (iii): *The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this* (Luke 18:11).

Thanking God that you have been spared gross immorality could be a good prayer...except that the singling out of the tax collector ruins the prayer with pride and scorn.

In any case, contrast the opinion of Jesus: *Then the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. (Luke 11:39) So he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God. (Luke 16:15)*

Verse 12 Fasting is one of the three

picties of Judaism, as well as prayer and almsgiving. See Lev 16:29–31; Num 29:7. Tithing (Deut 14:22–29) was recommended, but the Pharisee has gone beyond the basic requirements. Cf. an later rabbinic prayer in the Talmud:

Our Rabbis taught: On entering what does a man say? “May it be Thy will, O Lord my God, that no offence may occur through me, and that I may not err in a matter of *halachah* and that my colleagues may rejoice in me and that I may not call unclean clean or clean unclean, and that my colleagues may not err in a matter of *halachah* and that I may rejoice in them”. On his leaving what does he say? “I give thanks to Thee, O Lord my God, that Thou hast set my portion with those who sit in the *Beth ha-Midrash* and Thou hast not set my portion with those who sit in [street] corners, for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early for words of Torah and they rise early for frivolous talk; I labour and they labour, but I labour and receive a reward and they labour and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the life of the future world and they run to the pit of destruction.”

Verse 13 The bodily stance already tells us about this man: location, look, action, words. In a frank and forthright way, he admits who he is and straightforwardly asks for mercy. This prayer, too, was part of the synagogue service of later times. The sixth of the Eighteen Benedictions runs thus:

6. For forgiveness: Forgive us, O our Father, for we have sinned; pardon us, O our King, for we have transgressed; for you pardon and forgive. Blessed are you, O Lord, who is merciful and always ready to forgive.

Such prayer, of course, is rooted in the Psalms.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. (Psalms 51:1–3)

Verse 14 For the first hearers, this would have been a big surprise, an unthinkable reversal. It is difficult to know how we would capture the same sense of shock in today’s categories. Paradoxically, our inherent resistance to identifying with the Pharisee may be very revealing indeed! Presumption has not gone away, you know.

Note that the verb is in the passive, de-

noting that God has justified the sinner. We have already hear the final summing in Lk 14:11 (see above). Cf. The translation of the first beatitude in the NEB “Happy are those who know their need of God.”

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. There can be an element of defensiveness in our relationships with others. We are reluctant to let another see us as we see ourselves. Occasionally we meet someone with whom we can be totally open and know we will be accepted. With whom have you had that kind of a relationship? What was it like for you to have that freedom?

2. Likewise with God, when we come to prayer pretending to be better than we are, we are hiding from God. What difference does it make when you pray to God, acknowledging your faults and limitations? Have you ever found that when you are humble in this way in prayer, God lifts you up?

3. The parable is also a cautionary tale against judging others negatively on the basis of externals. Perhaps God, who looks into the heart, sees another picture. When have you discovered there was more to another person than the negative picture you got from first impressions?

PRAYER

O God, who alone can probe the depth of the heart, you hear the prayer of the humble and justify the repentant sinner.

As we stand before you, grant us the gift of humility, that we may see our own sins clearly and refrain from judging our neighbour.

We make our prayer though our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.



For I am already being poured out as an offering,

2 Tim 4:6 For I am already being poured out as an offering, and the time for me to depart is at hand. 7 I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith! 8 Finally the crown of righteousness is reserved for me. The Lord, the righteous Judge, will award it to me in that day—and not to me only, but also to all who have set their affection on his appearing.

2 Tim 4:16 At my first defence no one appeared in my support; instead they all deserted me—may they not be held accountable for it. 17 But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message would be fully proclaimed for all the Gentiles to hear. And so I was delivered from the lion's mouth! 18 The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed and will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever! Amen.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

2 Timothy has been our second reading for the last three Sundays. Today the final excerpt is from chapter 4. It is easily one of the most moving passages in the New Testament.

KIND OF WRITING

Vv.	2 TIMOTHY
1:1-2	Greeting
1:3-14	Thanksgiving
1:15-18	A personal note
2:1-4:8	Body of the letter
4:9-22	Personal note and prayer

In these notes, the Pastoral Letters are all considered to be second generation Pauline or later. The form of this letter is technically testamentary or farewell literature. This is nowhere more evident than in these passages appointed for today.

The reading offers two portions of 2 Timothy, one from the final part of the body of the letter (23:1-4:8) and the other from the personal note at the end (4:9-22).

The very personal note struck may seem

to challenge the case for taking the letter as not from Paul himself. However, in the pseudepigraphical (written in the name of someone else) letters of the time, such realistic, quite personal details are given. The two letters to Timothy offer a summary of the career of Paul, giving us a window on how Paul was received in later times: 1 Tim 1:15-16; 2 Tim 1:8, 11-13, 15-17; 2:2, 9-10; 3:10-11; 4:6-18.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

As in all the Pastorals, the context is the preservation of the faith in a later generation. See Sunday 27C for more detail.

RELATED PASSAGES

This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I am the worst of them! But here is why I was treated with mercy: so that in me as the worst, Christ Jesus could demonstrate his utmost patience, as an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life. (1Timothy 1:15-16 NET)

But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice together with all of you. (Philippians 2:17 NET)

Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. The former proclaim Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, because they think they can cause trouble for me in my imprisonment. The latter do so from love because they know that I am placed here for the defence of the gospel. (Philippians 1:15, 17, 16 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 6 The “I” at the start (*egō*) is very strong and in sharp contrast to the “you” of the verse before. The language used here is taken from OT ceremonial: Ex. 29:40-41; Lv. 23:13; Nu. 15:5-10; 28:7. Cf. Phil 2:17 above. In the second part of the verse, the word for time is *kairos*, that is the special time of salvation. Cf. *I feel torn between the two, because I have a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.* (Philippians 1:23 NET)

Verse 7 These three highly significant

affirmations are in parallel. The NRSV is better than the NET here:

- I have fought the good fight,
- I have finished the race,
- I have kept the faith.

5a uses the language of the athletic context, used before by the historical Paul. *Each competitor must exercise self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.* (1Corinthians 9:25 NET)

5b uses the language of the racecourse (*dromos*, hence hippodrome). Cf. *Do you not know that all the runners in a stadium compete, but only one receives the prize? So run to win.* (1Corinthians 9:24 NET)

5c drops images and speaks plainly. It is not quite clear if by faith is meant “teaching” or “trust”. The Pastoral tend towards faith as a creed, but perhaps both are in view here. At the time of writing, it seems, many has not persevered in the faith and, indeed, had been led astray.

Verse 8 The writer speak of *his* hope as the hope of everyone, generalising the appeal. Crown (*stephanos*) is also a term taken from the games and used elsewhere by Paul himself (Phil. 4:1; 1 Thes. 2:19). The language shades over in apocalyptic: righteous judge, day, appearing.

Verse 16-17 For those who take the letter to be by Paul himself, it is not clear what is meant here. For those who think the letter is written in the name of Paul, it offers again a portrait of the apostle as the model for faithful ministry. In contrast to those around him, Paul alone was faithful to the Lord who in turn was faithful to him. It may represent a historical memory of the postponement of martyrdom. The unexpected extra time allows a further ministry to the Gentiles.

Verse 18 A final expression of hope is given in the form of a prayer.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

- Looking back over my own discipleship, how would I assess it?
- Has it happened to you that you have been left to cope on your own in ministry and discipleship?

PRAYER

God every faithful, help us to be true to you just as you have been true to us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds

Sir 35:10 *Be generous when you worship the Lord,
and do not stint the first fruits of your hands.*
11 *With every gift show a cheerful face,
and dedicate your tithe with gladness.*
12 *Give to the Most High as he has given to you,
and as generously as you can afford.*
13 *For the Lord is the one who repays,
and he will repay you sevenfold.*
14 *Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it;
and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice;*
15 for the Lord is the judge,
and with him there is no partiality.
16 He will not show partiality to the poor;
but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.
17 He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan,
or the widow when she pours out her complaint.
18 Do not the tears of the widow run down her cheek
19 as she cries out against the one who causes them to fall?
20 The one whose service is pleasing to the Lord will be accepted,
and his prayer will reach to the clouds.
21 The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds,
and it will not rest until it reaches its goal;
it will not desist until the Most High responds
22 and does justice for the righteous, and executes judgment.
Indeed, the Lord will not delay,
and like a warrior will not be patient
until he crushes the loins of the unmerciful.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading is concerned with sincerity and wholeheartedness in the service of God. This goes well beyond performance because the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds.

Some verses have been restored in the reading (in italics) to give a sense of the wider context. The reading ends with v.22a, for obvious reasons.

KIND OF WRITING

As often in the Wisdom books, this is poetry, following the usual pattern of two lines saying almost the same thing. The repetition is very enriching as may be seen from a close reading of v.15cd.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Ecclesiasticus or Sirach is to be carefully distinguished from Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth. Both belong to the biblical Wisdom books, but they are quite different. Sirach is part of the wider, Deuterocanonical canon. As such, it survived mostly in Greek (and Latin) until recently. About two-thirds of the Hebrew version have been recovered.

Sirach shows many typical Wisdom features: practical advice and proverbs,

misogyny, a great appreciation for nature. Added to that, there is a considerable concern with the temple cult. Such attention to worship is evident in our reading.

Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom. (Sir 50:27)

It seems to have been collated and translated by a scribe named Ben Sira in the early second century BC.

Our reading bridges two sections: 35:1-13 on sacrifices and 35:14-35. The juxtaposition reveals their connectedness, a common theme in the books of the prophets.

RELATED PASSAGES

Humility is extolled elsewhere in Sirach, as in this inspiring text:

The spirit of those who fear the Lord will live, for their hope is in him who saves them. Those who fear the Lord will not be timid, or play the coward, for he is their hope. Happy is the soul that fears the Lord! To whom does he look? And who is his support? The eyes of the Lord are on those who love him, a mighty shield and strong support, a shel-

ter from scorching wind and a shade from noonday sun, a guard against stumbling and a help against falling. He lifts up the soul and makes the eyes sparkle; he gives health and life and blessing. (Sirach 34:14-20)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 Our reading is really a continuation of v. 14, which warns against trying to bribe God.

Verse 16 This may surprise because God is often portrayed as listening in a special way to the poor: *This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.* (Psalms 34:6) However, Sirach is not impressed by poverty as such. *When a person is taken away, sorrow is over; but the life of the poor weighs down the heart.* (Sirach 38:19)

Verse 19 The writer affirms that good morals are the equivalent of cultic offerings. God love us enough to want a response from within our deepest inner being. It is the heart—and the consistent life—which is pleasing to him.

Verse 21 The NRSV differs from the JB here. Yet the core idea is the same: it is the heart which pierces through to God.

Verse 22 The writer affirms that God will indeed respond speedily.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

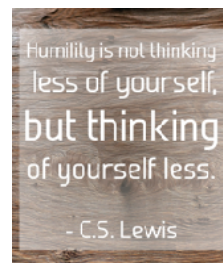
1. God is no respecter of status or externals—he sees the heart and true condition of us all. But his knowledge is not judgemental but compassionate.

2. What does it mean today to be humble before God? It means to acknowledge who we are in God's eyes—yes, his creation but also yes, his children.

3. The reading portrays persistence in prayer. This does not mean that God must somehow be “persuaded” but rather—as St Augustine puts it—we are enlarging our hearts to receive God's wonderful gifts.

PRAYER

God, we stand before you as you creation and as you children. Help us to open our hearts to you and to be your children both in name and in deed. Amen.



THE LITURGY

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; Ps 34 (33); 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading fits very well with the Gospel teaching on genuine humility. In fact, it fills out a bit the somewhat stark picture in the Gospel reading.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The psalm praises the humble, the just, the broken-hearted, those whose spirit is crushed. The response captures it well: *The poor man called; the Lord has heard him.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Ecclesiasticus 35:15-17, 20-22

In line with biblical tradition, our short reading—really a poem—affirms God's impartial love

Second reading

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

How would I like to face the autumn of my life? This reading looks back on a life of faith, not without disappointments, but always full of faith.

Gospel

Luke 18:9-14

Our short parable is a kind of trap, because we tend to identify with the good guy...but that's not always the case!

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 27 October

St Ottaran, monk

Romans 8:12-17

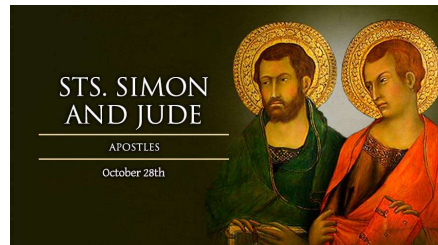
Abba Father is not that frequent in the New Testament. Paul uses it to remind his hearers of their own practice of prayer and thus bolster his persuasion.

Luke 13:10-17

The story of the woman bent double is a great story (strangely not read on Sundays). It has lots of potential at a metaphorical level. The argument used by Jesus to "excuse" his healing on the Sabbath is irrefutable.

Tuesday 28 October

Sts Simon and Jude, apostles



Ephesians 2:19-22

Our reading opens up a fundamental question: what or who are we as Christian believers? Using a building metaphor, the identikit is rich, to say the least.

Luke 6:12-16

Luke makes it plain that Jesus *prayed* before the choice and appointment of the Twelve. It is important to note that the Twelve function, in the ministry of Jesus, as a prophetic action, underscoring Jesus' programme which was the restoration of Israel. Cf. "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Matthew 15:24 NRSV) By the time Luke is writing the restriction to the Jewish people of Jesus' ministry was already in the distant past.

Wednesday 29 October

St Colman, bishop

Romans 8:26-30

The very first sentence of this reading is very consoling and often remembered. In the next few lines, Paul expands and explores the opening conviction.

Luke 13:22-30

The teaching in this Gospel is meant to be disturbing — disturbing to people who feel somehow complacent about "being saved". The original context may be found in the ministry of Jesus but at Luke's level the message is aimed at how own contemporaries.

Thursday 30 October

Romans 8:31-39

The great chapter 8 of Romans ends very poetically and powerfully. Difficult experience is still present, but subsumed into an exultant affirmation of faith.

Luke 13:31-35

Jesus is on "the way" towards Jerusalem, in Luke's symbolic worlds, towards the fulfilment of his mission and identity. The reading brings together courage and single-mindedness, as well as a touch of poignancy about what might have been. The ingathering of Israel was a great theme of the prophets and here is *the* theme of the prophet Jesus.

Friday 31 October

Bl Dominic Collins, martyr

Romans 9:1-5

In Romans 9-11, Paul embarks on the deepest reflection in the New Testament on the "no" of most of his co-religionists to Jesus. The split between Jews and Christians was already tragically apparent. It also cost Paul a great deal as we hear in this heartfelt confession.

Luke 14:1-6

It is a curiosity of Luke's Gospel that Jesus eats just as frequently with Pharisees as with sinners. In today's Gospel, the question of healing on the Sabbath comes to the fore. Jesus' illustration powerful...if it's okay to rescue an animal...

Saturday 1 November

All Saints (see full notes)

Apocalypse 7:2-4, 9-14

Even with some unfamiliar imagery, our reading is a great one for the feast. It holds out a powerful vision of paradise, beyond the struggles of this life.

1 John 3:1-3

Who am I? Who are we? In plain words a deep account is given of who we all are in the love of God.

Matthew 5:1-12

It can be hard to "hear" so familiar a reading. Perhaps there is a word or a feeling which matches my present experience?

