

Dearly beloved: Christ is among us!

Today we begin our turn towards the journey of Great Lent which we will enter in the middle of next month. The reading from the gospel today and for the next three Sundays focus us on Jesus' teaching about humility, repentance, love of neighbor and forgiveness. All of these we must have or certainly be striving for if our Lent is to mean anything, if we are to live in God and He in us.

Today Jesus speaks of humility to us using the imagery of two men at prayer in the Temple. One is a very devout, religious man who fasts twice a week and tithes. The other is a public sinner who works for the occupying Romans by collecting taxes for them and lining his own pockets through extortion and fraud. Who is justified in God's sight? The public sinner. It is because the tax collector places himself last, in the back of the Temple, doesn't even raise His eyes to God. He beats his breast, accusing himself, and saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." The Pharisee came to God puffed up with pride in what he had done and filled with judgment for the sinner in the back of the Temple. In his pride, he neglected to add to his good works justice and love of God and neighbor. (cf. Luke 11:42)

"It is a fearful thing to hate whom God has loved. To look upon another – his weaknesses, his sins, his faults, his defects – is to look upon one who is suffering. He is suffering from negative passions, from the same sinful human corruption from which you yourself suffer. This is very important: do not look upon him with the judgmental eyes of comparison, noting the sins you assume you'd never commit. Rather, see him as a fellow sufferer, a fellow human being who is in need of the very healing of which you are in need. Help him, love him, pray for him, do unto him as you would have him do unto you." So writes St. Tikhon of Zadonsk.

Such is humility. Humility gives us the proper way of looking at ourselves, at others, at God. Humility opens our eyes to see our own faults. Humility opens our eyes to see that our friend or enemy suffers, too. Humility opens our eyes to see how glorious God is in loving us who sin against Him daily.

Humility moves us to accept persecution rather than persecuting others.

Humility moves us to accept being crucified rather than crucifying others.

Humility moves us to accept being insulted rather than insulting others.

Humility lets us be slandered but not slander others.

Humility lets us be afflicted with sinners.

And the fullness of humility allows us to take on another's fault and accept punishment in his place. (cf. St. Isaac the Syrian)

There is a true story about two men, one of whom was righteous and the other who fell into sin. But their story ends much differently from the Pharisee and the tax collector. "Two brothers from a monastery went to market to sell the things they had made. As soon as he separated from his companion, the first fell into fornication. His monastic brother met him later and said, 'My brother, let us go to our monastery.' But the first replied, 'I am not going back'. The other persisted, saying, 'My brother, why not?' The first said, 'Because when you left me, I fell into fornication.' His brother, wishing to win him over, said to him, 'The same thing happened to me, too, when you left me; come, let us go and do strict penance and God will forgive us.' They went to tell the elders of the monastery what had happened to them, and the old men gave them commandments for doing penance. Then one of the brothers did penance for the other as though he had sinned himself. But God, seeing the affliction he was giving himself for love's sake, made known to one of the old men, after some days, that because of the great love of the brother who had not sinned, he had forgiven the one who had sinned. See what it is to give one's soul for one's brother." (The Sayings of the Desert Fathers) This is true humility, grounded in compassionate love for one's neighbor.

Whenever we may be tempted to be puffed up about how we're doing in Lent or in anything, may God grant us the remembrance of these two brothers that we may live in such humility, in such tenderheartedness for our friends and enemies.