

## *The publican went home justified*

Homily, 23rd October 2016

Luke 18,9-14

father G. Papparone o.p.

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We have listened to a parable by Jesus our Lord, offered, taught to the men who were His followers, to the people who go often to Him, with this specific intention He Himself declared: *he told this parable for some who had the intimate presumption to be righteous, and despised others.*

So, Jesus is addressing a precise category of people, and then, at some point in His exposition, he even mentions this category: the man He is talking about is a member of the **Pharisees**.

However this sociological definition is not so important, what is important is **this person's frame of mind**, his religious and social condition.

**Why does the Lord say that this person had the presumption to be righteous?**

Jesus thereafter lists the qualities that actually make this person righteous in the eyes of his fellow men: he was not a thief, he did not behave unfairly, he was not an adulterer, he respected the law... so he was a righteous man!

**What is then the nature of this person's misjudgement, where does his presumption lie?**

*Here we need to understand that we must go beyond the merely ethical, religious, social dimension, and think of the relationship between Creator and creature, between God and men.*

After that, we also need to understand the meaning of this term **"righteousness": what does it mean to be righteous or just?**

What is the exact nature of the righteousness that the publican – the sinner, the unjust person in the eyes of men – has received?

Surely, from the social, political and religious viewpoint, the publican was a questionable person...

So, the Lord is inviting us to take a quality leap, and try to discern that **religion is not something that provides us with the means to regulate relationships between men, by following a sort of moral code!**

Something fundamental and absolutely necessary to regulate the relationships between people and also in some way to eliminate from one's heart some forms of evil; but **religion is at a different level**; at the level, as I was saying before, **of the relationship between God and man.**

*Religion is about this possibility to live in the presence of God, to live in truth this relationship between Him and the human person.*

The Jewish-Christian faith does not primarily concern ethical norms but **the relationship** and, secondarily and in parallel, **the life**, the existential, spiritual dimension, that God wants to donate us and that is summed up in the word **"justice"**, to be "justified" by God.

When we say **justified**, a better word may be *sanctified, reconciled to God*: that's the proper word.

God wants to make us not only men, righteous from the ethical point of view, but that remain self-enclosed, concerned about their own humanity, individuality, ego...

Here lies the **presumption**: fostering through religion, ethics, and generally our behaving in the proper way, a narcissistic self-gratification, that isolates us within ourselves, and separates us from God and from the others. An attitude actually that builds up a barrier between us and God and other people, and that considers other people and God as an instrument for our “egoistic” fulfilment!

**God, on the contrary, wants to encourage us to interrelate as sons of God, and brothers in Christ.**

**Thus, faced with this goal** – of being sons of God, of living as sons of God and as brothers to all our fellows – **we are absolutely sinful and unprepared!**

**Our only chance** is to receive God’s help, that, as exemplified in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, reaches us at the moment when we feel sinners, that is, disconnected from God, far-removed from Him, as this was the case also for the Pharisee: he was a rightful man from the social point of view and unjust from the existential, concrete point of view, because he was distant, he despised other men, and faced God with arrogance and conceit.

**The Pharisee thinks that the relationship between God and man is almost a relationship between peers:** You tell me what I should do, I do it, and now I deserve my reward...

Here, a religion described by someone as *the religion of performance!*

The truth **about man** on the contrary is that **man is a creature, always dependent on God, and even when acting properly, choosing well and seeking goodness, all this comes from God, not man; it comes from the grace of God attracting man.**

True religion must allow us to discover **our being creature**, our **dependency**, the immense gratuitous love that God has for us, and, through this discovery, religion must make us approach others with eyes of mercy, of hospitality, of sympathy, of forgiveness, of comfort...

This is our faith. The foundation of Christian religion is this, the foundation of Revelation is this: Jesus has declared that He came to this world not for the just, but for the sinners, precisely for those that realise that they need Him.

For those who consider themselves righteous, God, through Jesus, has nothing to give, nothing to offer...

**So, let us ask God the ability to discern in ourselves the signs of this presumption, the signs of this ambiguity in living our faith, the attempts we make to appease our conscience, our sense of guilt;** in other words, what makes us to tell in front of Jesus, in front of God: *here, Lord, I completed the task that you assigned me; I was virtuous, now give me my reward!*

On the contrary, let us ask Him to make us feel continuously in need of His help, and that all the good that we could do – especially living our existence according to the truth – can be achieved only if received with humility and sincerity from God.

Because the truth that defines us as men can never be negated: **He is God and we are His creatures, He is life, the origin of life, and we are the nullity that can receive this life,** “we are” because He gives us life, we can grow because God donates us the existence.

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We can be reconciled and sanctified because He gives us this grace of reconciliation, of sanctification.

So, let us put ourselves in front of God truthfully, with humility, and say:

*Lord, fulfil in me the work of Your salvation,  
Do not look at my sins, but look at Your mercy.  
Give me a heart pure, simple, sincere, able to stand in front of You in truthfulness.*

Thanks be to God.