



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE
WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14,16-19; Psalm 32; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/frank-brennan-6/homily-231022>

We've had another week of uncontrollable natural disasters. This week it's been floods. One friend wrote during the week: 'I was talking to my brother during the week and he said that Banyena, Donald, Charlton, St Arnaud and Glenorchy were all flooded. He was quite philosophical about it all. There was nothing he could do about it. I've been praying for all those who were affected that they might get all the assistance they need.'

There are those who are flooded and those of us well away from the floods, able to do little but pray. There were some moving stories out of Echuca where the authorities had to decide where to place a 2 km levee bank. The inevitable result was that some houses fell on the protected side of the levee bank, and others fell on the unprotected side. As one unprotected householder said, 'I can see the logic, but it is so heart breaking.' She wryly observed that the placement of the levee would result in higher flood water inundating her property. She accepted that the levee bank would work discrimination wherever it was placed.

One 64 year old resident whose house was on the wrong side of the levee bank had been evacuated. Her son and his mates had sandbagged the house. But overnight, others came and took 300 of the sandbags for their own use. So then community volunteers came forward to sandbag the house once again. One fellow in a wheelchair even offered a hand.

Stories with such contrasts have real poignancy. There are those on one side of the levee bank who are safe. There are those on the other side of the levee bank who are not. There are those who help their neighbour in need, one sandbag at a time. There are those who help themselves regardless of their neighbour's needs or entitlements, one sandbag at a time.



In today's gospel Jesus tells a parable of similar contrast. There are two men who have come to the Temple to pray. There is a Pharisee who does good things. He pays tithes on everything he gets. He fasts twice a week. He may be a touch righteous, but you could not say that he is a bad man. The other is a tax collector. There are no good things listed in his ledger. There is no evidence whatever that he is a good man.

The one who does good things prays by comparing himself with others and thanking God that he is so much better. The one who has nothing good to show for himself prays by pleading, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' He goes home justified. The other man does not. The one who prays by raising himself up 'will be humbled'. The one who prays by humbling himself 'will be raised up.'

Scripture scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says the parable 'invites internalization by every reader because it speaks to something deep within the heart of every human. The love of God can so easily turn into an idolatrous self-love; the gift can so quickly be seized as a possession; what comes from another can so blithely be turned into self-accomplishment. Prayer can be transformed into boasting. Piety is not an unambiguous posture.'

The prayer of the pious Pharisee in the parable 'is one of peripheral vision. Worse, he assumes God's role of judge: not only does he enumerate his own claims to being just, but he reminds God of the deficiency of the tax-agent, in case God had not noticed. In contrast, the tax-agent is utter simplicity and truth. Indeed, he is a sinner. Indeed, he requires God's gift of righteousness because he has none of his own. And because he both needs and recognizes his need for the gift, he receives it.'¹

There in Echuca, the householders could have ended up on either side of the levee bank. Depending on their circumstances and the social pressures and expectations, some residents could have been tempted to steal sandbags under cover of night, just as readily as they might have joined others by day in helping their neighbours.

If we're honest with ourselves, we all have moments in prayer when we thank God that we are not like those others, whether they be tax collectors or sandbag stealers. We remind God of the good we do, including helping our neighbours

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 274.



with their sandbagging in their hour of need. Then there are those moments in prayer, perhaps when we end up on the wrong side of the levee bank (through no fault of our own) or when we take sandbags for our own use, convincing ourselves that our need is greater or that it is each person for himself. They're the moments in prayer when we simply say, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' There's something of the Pharisee and something of the tax collector in each of us.

Saint Augustine once wrote: 'Return within yourself. In the inner man dwells truth'.² In his General Audience this week, Pope Francis said, 'This is an invitation I would extend to all of you, and even to myself: "Return within yourself. Read your life. Read yourself inwardly, the path you have taken. With serenity. Return within yourself"'.³

Let's pray for ourselves and for those affected by the floods. Returning within ourselves, let's admit the Pharisee in each of us, and let's keep an eye out for those devastated by this latest round of natural disasters. Let's maintain our hope that the Lord is a God of Justice:

*who knows no favourites.
Though not unduly partial toward the weak,
yet he hears the cry of the oppressed.
The Lord is not deaf to the wail of the orphan,
nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint.
The one who serves God willingly is heard;
his petition reaches the heavens.
The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds;
it does not rest till it reaches its goal,
nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds,
judges justly and affirms the right,
and the Lord will not delay.*

² St Augustine, On True Religion, XXXIX, 72.

³ See <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022/documents/20221019-udienza-generale.html>