Homily – 30th Sunday of the Year (C)

*Ecclus. 35: 12-14, 16-19; 2 Tim. 4: 6-8, 16-18 & Lk. 18: 9-14*

I don’t know if any of you are familiar with the “Discworld” novels of the late Terry Pratchett. It is a series of nearly 30 books in a vaguely “fantasy” genre, all situated on an imaginary “flat earth” carried through space on the back of a giant celestial turtle which swims through the galaxy. About half the novels are detective stories, but the others are more varied, each one taking a separate theme: Hollywood and the movies, Shakespeare and the theatre, Opera, the Post Office, Banking – and exploiting them for their comic potential. Aside from their humour, they can be pretty insightful in the way that good satire can be; perhaps one of the most insightful, I think, is his book “Small Gods” – a comic analysis of institutionalised religion and the monastic life.

Without wishing to spoil your fun and giving away the whole plot, the story focuses on two contrasting characters: an incompetent novice called Brutha and the Chief Exquisitor of the Church of the “god” Om called Deacon Vorbis. Despite his incompetence, Brutha has two remarkable gifts: a superb memory and a total inability to tell lies, and is very much the hero. Deacon Vorbis by contrast is very much the villain, effectively ruling the Omnian Church by fear and torture – he is a ruthless Machiavellian politician, although his outward religious knowledge and observance are faultless. After a series of misadventures, including a very amusing meeting with an hallucinating hermit, Brutha actually encounters his god Om deep in the desert, and they form a close friendship, mainly because Om *needs* Brutha. Despite the power and magnificence of his cult, Om has very few believers – people believe in his *Church*, but no longer in *him*. The friendship he forms with Brutha, one of his few remaining believers, gradually transforms him from a very OT type of deity, all smiting and thunderbolts, to a much more recognisably “Christian” type of deity – and will ultimately transform the whole of Omnian belief. As for Deacon Vorbis, the seemingly faultless paragon of Omnian observance, the god Om claims never even to have heard of him, let alone responded to his prayers, despite Vorbis’ claims to be his prophet. By the end, it becomes very clear that the words Vorbis had claimed as divine instruction received through revelation have simply been the echoes of his own thoughts; it becomes clear that the whole of his “prayer” has simply been him talking to himself, wrapped up in his own plans, in his own ambitions.

Unlikely as it may seem, therefore, given his secularist and atheistic beliefs, Pratchett offers us two insights which seem to find an echo in today’s gospel; firstly, that there is always a risk in religious life that even good and well-meaning people can start believing more strongly in the institutions of religion than they do in the God who should stand at its heart, that even good people can mistake faithful ritual observance with an encounter with the living God. Secondly, he warns us that prayer which does not truly have God at its centre can be a very dangerous thing.

Think back to the Gospel we heard this morning. In St Luke, this passage follows on immediately after the gospel we heard last Sunday about the unjust judge and the persistent widow, a gospel where the Lord encourages us to be persevering in our prayer and not to lose heart. In a sense, therefore, today’s gospel, again about prayer, is the next logical step in Jesus’ teaching. Jesus also uses two contrasting characters: the Pharisee and the tax collector. Despite the “slating” they get in the gospel narratives, it is likely that the Pharisees were, at heart, good people. The development of Pharisaism in the centuries before Christ seems to have been a genuine response to the Babylonian exile; post-exilic “theology” understood the Exile as God’s punishment for Israel’s persistent failure to obey the Law and the covenants, and so the post-exilic period sees a new insistence on monotheism, obedience and observance, that the Lord is the one God, and him alone shall you serve (cf. Deut. 6:4). The Pharisees sought firstly to understand the Law themselves through study and disputation, and then to teach their communities how that Law might truly be put into practice in everyday life – hence the “scrupulousness” of the many portraits of the Pharisees in the gospels, with “good observance” prized as a sign of a true inner piety. As always, though, such an approach is risky – risky for them, and risky for us too as Catholic Christians – since it is so easy for external observance to slip into empty formalism and hypocrisy. It is so easy for us to think that if we trust in the rules, if we do what we are told, if we believe in the institution then everything will be fine – but it always begs the question “Where is God in all this?”

Think of the Pharisee’s prayer. While indeed it *seems* as though it is addressed to the Lord from its opening words “I thank you, God...” in fact it is not. The Pharisee is actually focussed solely on himself, on his own virtues, on his difference from the common herd. All the way through it is “I do this, I do that, I do the other” – God doesn’t get a look in, and nothing is truly thanksgiving, merely pride and disdain. And Jesus words about the Pharisee are very pointed. I wonder if you noticed, but introducing him to his hearers, Jesus says: “The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer *to himself* ”. The Pharisee is just like Vorbis in the novel, locked in his own private world of thoughts, not actually praying at all. Nowhere in all this does he encounter God; nowhere in all this is he even open to the *possibility* of encountering God. He has himself, his achievements, his virtues – nothing else matters.

It’s all so very different with the tax collector. Clearly he knows something about God, something about the reality of God, of who *He* is – otherwise he would not stand afar off and keep his eyes downcast. But equally clearly, he also knows something about himself, about who *he* is, about the truth of his own situation – otherwise he would not make that simple but powerful plea: *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* The tax collector’s prayer is a prayer founded on truth – both the truth of God as God and of himself as sinner – and being founded on truth it becomes a genuine encounter with God, a true healing, a real reconciliation. The pharisee’s “prayer” springs from fantasy, from a self-regarding satisfaction with his own world; refusing to countenance the truth – either about God or himself – it is a prayer which excludes God, which locks him out and simply reinforces the man’s vanity.

Over the years, much has been said and written about prayer, and much of it very valuable. I can scarcely claim any great expertise myself. I know only too well that I joined the monastery because I was rubbish at prayer, but knew also that I couldn’t survive without it. I knew that I was rubbish at prayer, and that only the structure and time given to the Office and the support and encouragement of my brethren would help me – otherwise I knew I would starve. In c.20 of the Rule, St Benedict reminds us that: *“God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words. Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace”* (20:3-4). Few prayers, perhaps, fit St Benedict’s definition so perfectly as that prayer of the tax collector: *God, be merciful to me a sinner* – indeed, as I’m sure you know, it forms the backbone of the whole “Jesus Prayer” tradition. No matter what, though, I am certain that for each of us, it is *honesty* in our prayer which counts above all – an honesty before the God who loves us despite our weaknesses and failures, an honesty about our need of God’s help, whether we pray for others or for ourselves, an honesty which is based on no false image of ourselves, since God already knows us as we are. And perhaps if we can pray in that same spirit of radical honesty we see in the tax collector, a radical honesty which is the true meaning of humility, then perhaps we too will encounter the mercy of the Father, and go home at rights with God. Amen.

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22.10.16

Bidding Prayers: 30th Sunday, Year C

Intro: Fr Oswald

R: Let us ask God’s blessing for the Church, for our Holy Father Pope Francis, for our Bishop, Bernard, and for all the faithful:

May we, who seek to worship God in spirit and in truth, always be honest about our weaknesses and our failures, and so come to be a genuine sign of God’s mercy in our world.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for peace throughout the world, and especially in Syria and the Middle East:

May God the all-merciful Father inspire a new vision of peace in the hearts of all people, and especially amongst political leaders, that conflict and warfare may cease, and peace and justice be restored.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all those in special need: for those trapped by poverty or homelessness, for migrants and refugees driven from their homes by conflict or poverty, for those who still endure slavery and for those unjustly imprisoned;

May the God of all consolation be with them in their need, and may he inspire us to give whatever help we can.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for the sick and the dying, especially any known to this congregation;

May the Risen Christ, who himself knew suffering, fill them with hope.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray in a few moments of silence for our own intentions: (longer pause)

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us ask Mary, Mother of the Church and Help of Christians, to join her prayers to ours as we say: *Hail Mary*...

Concluding Prayer: Fr Oswald