

Not the Last Coca Cola

Homily for 30th Sunday Ordinary Time
October 23-24th

Every language has its own idioms. For instance, we have phrases like “a dime a dozen” to refer to something that is common. Or “too big for his britches” doesn’t speak at all to the size of one’s jeans. Rather it refers to someone who is over-confident or full of self-importance. Or if something is not complicated, we say, “It’s not rocket science!”

In Spanish there is an idiom that goes like this. Sorry ahead of time for my pronunciation: *Te crees la última Coca Cola del desierto*. This means “You think you’re the last Coca Cola in the desert.” It refers to someone who is proud, someone who acts superior to everybody around them.

That’s the kind of people Jesus is speaking to in today’s Gospel reading; people who think they’re the last Coca Cola in the desert. It’s tempting to think this story isn’t about us. But what if it is? Jesus’ stories are always a glimpse into the heart of God. And Jesus’ stories are meant to change our life. Not just inspire us. Not just challenge us. Jesus’ stories excavate our true character and motivations and challenge us to follow Christ with a fearless commitment. That kind of commitment will change our life. So, unless we really are the last Coca Cola in the desert, this story is for everyone in this room.

As we enter this parable, we hear again something St Luke did last week. He explains the people to whom he is addressing his story. Last week St Luke mentioned that the story of the Persistent Widow was directed by Jesus to his disciples so they could pray constantly and not lose heart. This week the audience is very different. Here St Luke tells us:

“Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt”.

There’s an old joke about a psychiatrist who is seeing a new patient for the first time. The psychiatrist says, “I’m not aware of your issue, so maybe you should start at the beginning.” The patient rolls his eyes and sighs, “Alright. In the beginning, I created the heavens and the earth.” The Pharisee in our story thinks that he is well, God’s gift to God.

But here is the heart of his problem, he isn’t proud in a positive way but a negative way. To be proud of a child’s achievement can be a way to celebrate their effort and perseverance with something in which they have excelled. This is positive pride. Negative pride that is a mortal sin that is motivated by self-righteousness and looking at others with disdain.

This is why Jesus sets up a story with real shock value. All would have celebrated the Pharisee because within the Jewish society of the first century they were highly respected. Tax collectors not so much. They were Jews who worked for the Romans and would extort their fellows Jews, living materially comfortably but cut off from their community because of their crooked ways.

Jesus uses the example of these two men to teach us a very important lesson. What is the attitude of the heart, for it is the heart that matters to God; not how impressive and well thought of we may be in the eyes of others.

Let's think now about the Pharisee. Jesus says that "he is standing by himself and praying thus". A more literal translation of this verse is "He was praying to himself". So, although he says the name "God" this is a ruse. The one to whom he is praying is himself, with words that are self congratulatory. The lines that point out how he trusted in himself read like this:

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all my income.

But he doesn't practise this spiritual discipline and act of generosity from a pure motive, but so he can congratulate himself for being the last Coca Cola in the desert. Then listen to his attitude toward others:

"I thank you that I am not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers or even like this tax collector".

Do you hear how contemptuous he is?

Now listen to the simple prayer of the tax collector.

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up at heaven, but was beating his breast and saying: "God be merciful to me a sinner".

Something has happened in the life of this man. He realizes how his life has been lived in such a way that he is broken. Overcome with a sense of how his choices have brought him to a place and complete dependence upon God, he cries out "Have mercy".

Hear what Jesus says next. "I tell you this man went down to his home justified rather than the other".

But think about this with me. When the Pharisee left the Temple, he would have felt good about himself. His heart was puffed up like a peacock. The tax collector would have experienced a kind of spiritual heaviness because he is really coming to terms with the man he has become.

But here is the point: From the perspective of heaven it is not the one who thought he was the last coca cola in the desert that is right with God, but rather the one whose soul is as arid as a desert is right with God because he is honest before God.

The Pharisee came to the Temple to worship himself, whereas the tax collector in realizing the true nature of God's holiness and mercy, wants to change by the grace of God.

Over 1600 years ago, the theologian and philosopher St. Augustine wrote to one of his students about what it takes to understand the truth of God. He said it requires three qualities. The first is humility; the second is humility; the third, humility . . ."

But why are brokenness and humility necessary for us to understand God? A Protestant pastor Kyle Idleman wrote a book titled *AHA: God Moments That Can Change Our Lives*. Idleman was asked this question in an interview about his book “What advice do you have for people who have tried and tried to change certain areas of their lives, and for whatever reason they’ve failed at it?”

Idleman replied the reason some people can’t move on to positive change in their spiritual lives is because they’ve never experienced real brokenness. He says, “As a pastor, I’ll ask people who are in the process of transformation and change, have you cried about it?”

This is the point where most of us walk away. This is the point where we retreat into our comfortable lives and miss out on the joy of confession and repentance. “Have you cried about it?”

We avoid brokenness as much as possible. We try to protect our ego, our image, our self-sufficiency as much as possible. “I’m a good person, especially compared to them! Look at all the good things I’ve done. Look at how I’ve played by the rules.” We’re still trying to earn God’s approval. And there is an inverse relationship between earning God’s approval and receiving God’s mercy. The tax collector stood before God in his brokenness.

Whenever we come to Mass, we are doing something liturgically whereby we are standing with the Tax Collector.

When we pray the Confession Prayer at the beginning of Mass, we beat our chest three times, and by doing so we are imitating the stance of the tax collector who “beat his chest three times”. As we pray the words “I have greatly sinned in my thoughts, words and deeds we are in fact saying Lord, I come to you in my weakness and in my brokenness”.

When we come intentionally to Mass with the heart of the tax collector we want then pray with the interior attitude expressed in the first reading from Sirach:

The person whose service is pleasing to God will be accepted, and their prayer will reach to the clouds. The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal.

What a gift it is to learn the way of humility and brokenness. For then we can sigh with a sense of relief that I am not the last coca cola in the desert.