

## The Pharisee, the tax collector, and the grace of humility

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) has been told and retold in the events of my own life. There have been times when I have put my faith in activities and 'results' rather than in God's mercy. And other times when I have come to God desperately empty-handed, and found immeasurable riches. There have been times when I have been proud and arrogant, demanding that others (or 'the church') live up to my standards of what 'should' and 'ought' to happen. And other times when my own inadequacies have seemed overwhelming.

Parents tell me that having children is a sure way to dismantle one's tendencies towards arrogance! Your kids have a way of reminding you of your smallness and fragility before a greater mystery. You can stand there with all your degrees and work experience, but none of it can solve the dilemma of a toddler bent on a temper-tantrum in the middle of the shopping mall. You can handle a professional crisis of mammoth proportions, yet be reduced to tears by a stubborn three year old. You learn to let go of the glittering image of yourself. For anyone who has had the opportunity to play a pastoral role in a parish, perhaps much the same can be said! The most

basic, grassroots levels of relating are where all the gospel theory is put to the test.

Committed single people, perhaps childless too, are in a unique position to understand the gift of being humbled. Every year they rejoice in the anniversaries of other people's marriages, never their own. They buy birthday gifts for other people's children, never their own. They pray fervently for priestly and religious vocations, yet such a calling remains unfulfilled in their own lives. At its vocational heart their life's perspective is shaped by a sense of expectation and empty handedness, of asking questions of the future and entrusting it to God. They have no institutionally-recognized, publicly-celebrated, theologically-elaborated commitment to champion! It's just 'me'. The gift of self.

I am reminded here of a beautiful prayer image: the beggar's bowl. I am told of a man – an artistic man with a gift for sculpture - who comes to prayer holding a 'beggar's bowl'. Out of a lump of clay he has shaped a symbol of his readiness to come before the Lord emptied, open and ready to accept whatever God wants to give him, or not give him.

I think, too, that loss and grief are wonderful teachers in humility. When one's carefully ordered life falls apart, and there is nothing you can do to reverse the course of a tragedy, bring someone back to life or undo the effects of sin, all you can do is

come before God and say 'Help me. Hold me. Don't let go of me.'

At that point, transformation can begin. •

