30th Sunday of ordinary time
PHARISEE AND TAX-COLLECTOR
You don’t have to make acts of contrition: thank God.

When we listen to the story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, we tend to turn the repenting tax-collector into a hero of repentance, or at least into a model for us in our own expressions of repentance. He beat his breast and asked for mercy. We like this ‘act of contrition’. Nowhere else in the gospels are tax collectors and sinners (or any others) admonished to repent in this way, by standing in the temple (or anywhere else) and asking for mercy.

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It might be useful to look at Jewish practices at the time, and then at the controversial position Jesus took in regard to them.

There is no question that a return to high moral standards was required of repentant deviants, in Israel generally. But a lot more was usually expected than a return to the living of virtuous values. Conformity to a whole host of Jewish observances was required, too. Repenting and forgiven Jews were expected to offer a sacrifice in the temple. If they couldn’t do that for any reason (such as distance), they had to say penitential prayers. [Note that the prayers are a second and less desirable choice – the temple sacrifice was the first choice.] In the texts we have, these prayers get longer and longer as the documents in which we read them move from Hebrew to Greek (and Jews migrate from Palestine to the Greek cities). These prayers are not private and interior, but public and oral. They are made to God alone. They often remind God of God’s Covenant obligation to forgive those who belonged to the Covenant, that is, the children of Abraham. [I have little doubt that Jews, especially those who lived in rural areas, also said simpler, private prayers of this kind, but there is not much documentation about that.]

There were other practices apart from prayers, such as standing, kneeling, prostrating oneself, extending one’s hands, fasting, rending one’s clothes, putting on sackcloth, sitting in ashes, tearing one’s hair or beard (if any), weeping. These are familiar rituals of mourning. Until Jews had done something of all this, they were generally still considered to be ‘sinners’ who hadn’t yet ‘repented’.

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Jesus came from this background but he was different. He did ask a return of repenting people to high moral living. When Jesus forgave prostitutes and unjust taxmen at a lunch, he clearly didn’t send them back to work for the afternoon. But Jesus was non-conformist in regard to the usual practices that accompanied forgiveness. At least they were not prominent in his teaching. You could say he neglected them. Perhaps his own close disciples (most of them Galileans) were not heavily into such things either – they were a scruffy lot of largely ‘non-practising’ Jews, scoffed at by the ‘observant’ as ‘sinners’. But perhaps Jesus was making a bigger point: perhaps he saw these things as incompatible with his message. Perhaps he had an original view about all this. Perhaps he himself didn’t do the various rituals (he didn’t fast and seldom expressed grief or sorrow or lamentation, and put no
demand on his own followers to do these things), and he didn’t like the content of the
going prayers (especially the ones that claimed a right to forgiveness from God
because they were Jews). I think he came at the matter from a different angle.

First of all, he said, emphatically, that the **one and only condition** needed for
forgiveness from God, was **our forgiving of those who have offended us**. Where
there is mutual forgiveness among humans, the forgiving God is present there. That is
the point of the Our Father. That is his prayer: we forgive those who trespass against
us, and so God forgives us our own trespasses. We imitate God by loving friend and
foe alike, just as God loves us all alike. This, for Jesus, is the sole ground for praying
for forgiveness. [So who did the tax-collector forgive in Lk 18 as he asked God to
have mercy on him? Was it perhaps the Pharisee??] This position is unique in
Israel’s history.

Note that Jesus never seems to have demanded explicit confession of sins. He
just demanded that we give forgiveness to another wronged human being,
before we get it from God.

Secondly, when people really forgave one another (with God involved), the most
spontaneous thing to do was to **have a meal**. Jesus didn’t say, come on, do penance,
his meals were occasions of massive joy. You couldn’t look ‘sorrowful’ at them! The Joy overwhelmed any anxiety or
guilt or worry about being forgiven or not. [So who did the tax-collector in Lk 18
lunch with that day? Was it …the Pharisee?]

Note that in the gospel Jesus does ask that Tyre and Sidon repent in sackcloth
and ashes. I don’t think these words are said by the historical Jesus. He
actually had very little connection with those towns. It looks like a reference
to oracles in the Hebrew Bible that a later evangelist is hanging on Jesus.

Note too that in the gospel Jesus speaks of Nineveh repenting in response to
Jonah: and I understand the reference in the same way. When people rejected
Jesus, as in Nazareth, he didn’t ask them to repent for not getting along with
him! He forgave them!

In the early Church, this position of Jesus was watered down, or even changed. There
was a tendency to think that if one belonged to Christ (that is, the church, in baptism)
and took part in the sacraments (that is, the Eucharist, that is, went to Sunday mass),
one had a sort of right to be forgiven by God. The tradition went soft on the unique
point made by Jesus, that reciprocal human forgiveness was always the sole root and
ground of any divine forgiveness. The group you belonged to didn’t make any
difference, even if it was the church.

As time went on, and this sense of church and sacrament decreased, good people,
even good Christians, fell into the practice of **interior personal prayers** for
forgiveness, irrespective of due apologies to those they had hurt or wronged. They
made personal acts of contrition to God, not to the people they had hurt. They were
taught to say these prayers when they came, individually, to confession. Many of
them said their act of contrition before they went to bed each night, as ‘insurance’
against dying and being found wanting by God! They lost a lot of the mutuality that Jesus saw in it all, and they didn’t experience the shared joy of it all.

I think it is in this context that the ‘act of contrition’ came to the fore. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that ‘among the penitent’s acts, contrition occupies first place. Contrition is “sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again”.’ (n.1451, citing the Council of Trent).

I think this is how we have taken the prayer-words of the tax-collector out of the context of Jesus in his ministry, and made them an example of our ‘acts of contrition’. “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner”. Perhaps we could include the words of the returning prodigal son, not to God, but to his father: “I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am unworthy to be called your son.” We have developed acts of contrition around this idea. You get them in the Confiteor at mass, and in some of the Psalms. There is one (in Australia at least) that many were taught in infancy:

“O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee and I detest my sins above every other evil because they displease Thee, my God, Who, in Thine infinite goodness art so deserving of all my love, and I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace never more to offend Thee and to amend my life. Amen.”

The mood here is certainly different from that of Jesus.

There is another act of contrition, still often used by many Catholics of an older generation:

“O my God, I am heartily sorry for all my sins, and I detest them above every evil, because they have offended You, my God, and because they deserve your dreadful punishments, and because they have crucified our Lord Jesus Christ, and I firmly resolve never to sin again.”

The mood is no better, and the content, if I may say so, is worse: our little sins do not offend God infinitely, and God is not waiting to give us dreadful punishments for them, and they have certainly not been the reason why Jesus was crucified.

It would be good to take a look at whatever one you use, if you indeed use one, and compare it with what Jesus did with sin and forgiveness. I suspect a lot of us say acts of contrition regularly without often really forgiving the people around us!

Here is one attempt at an act of trust (I would rather call it trust than an act of contrition):

AN ACT OF TRUST IN GOD

Loving, Personal God, you invite me to TRUST in your love for me, just as I am. Your message to me is almost too good to be true. Open my heart to believe the good news you are offering me. I'm sorry I haven't taken you at your word. Partner God, I lean on you with confidence.
Teach me to trust other persons as I trust you, to be open to them as I am to you. Teach me to forgive them. Forgive my narrowness of vision: it prevents me from choosing life, closes me off from love, and blinds me to the dignity of other people. Teach me, like Jesus, to love life, choose love, and be open to the personhood of those around me. I TRUST you are with me.

I was looking for an example of a parallel ‘ACT OF THANKSGIVING’ to God for being so full of forgiveness for us. I decided the Eucharist was the best one!

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SIN

There are many models and metaphors for sin. Some are relational. Sin is seen as rebellion, as adultery, as refusal to heed, as abandonment, as rejection. Some are varieties of failure (failure in relationship and otherwise). Sin is seen as crossing a boundary, wandering from a path, going astray, missing a mark, erring, deviating from a norm, going crooked and not straight. This includes cognitive failure: sin is seen as failure to listen, and to understand.

Let us note immediately that many of these boundaries are artificial at best and the product of bias at worst.

There are two models or metaphors for sin that predominate in history. Sin is seen as stain, and it is seen as debt. As stain, it must be washed away and cleansed. As debt, it must be paid: we have a commercial, economic metaphor.

Let us note immediately that both in Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity the model of sin as debt does not imply a mechanical or legalistic accounting. God freely erases much debt with little or no payment. What the man in debt gives is next to nothing to God. The sinner gives earth to God, who owns it anyway, and gets heaven.

Where did the link between sin and debt come from? Aramaic uses the same word for both ideas. Aramaic may have done this through Akkadian influence. That influence may well have occurred through the Assyrian and/or especially Babylonian periods. In the latter period, the Persians in Babylon had brought in a money economy….It is interesting, however, that the actual use of the equivalence of sin and debt in Aramaic does not occur until Qumran Aramaic texts, and early Christian Syrians writing in an Aramaic dialect.

Let us note that in Matthew’s Our Father, the forgiveness of sin is equated with the remission of debt. We tend not to think of Matthew as an early Christian Syrian!

The classic way of paying off the debt of sin, in both Rabbinic and early Christian writings, is almsgiving. This is interesting, in that in all pagan cultures at the time, there was no religious obligation to care for poor – it was left to the state to handle. For Jews and Christians, giving a gift to the poor was equated with giving a gift to the
What is most emphasized in the Jesus tradition, is ‘heroic’ almsgiving, when one gives all one’s goods to the poor and so effectively joins the poor.

The commercial metaphor for sin as debt seems to be behind developments like punishment for sin, forgiveness of sin in the sense of non-application of punishment, and atonement.

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DOES GOD HAVE AMNESIA?

God forgets the sins of Israel, does not even remember our sins.
Is 43,25; Jer 31,34; Ps 79,8; 25,7
Hb 8,12; 10, 17.

Just gone from reality and memory – even God’s…
No longer an issue that affects relationship with God – have been decisively dealt with…
So God looks on us through the lens of sins-dealt-with.
Even more, doesn’t even remember dealing with them…

Not just the end of history at death, the end of memory…

Counter-intuitive? Miracle of Miracles?
No, the real God is so much a God of Love that it is natural for God to do that….