

‘The Humble Man’s Prayer Pierces the Clouds’

What do you give the person who has everything? It’s the sort of question that comes up every year as we start thinking about Christmas again. You can’t surprise or delight them with anything because they already have it.

It’s a bit like that with the Pharisee in the Gospel today. God can do nothing for him because he doesn’t admit of any need. He is a self-made man in his own eyes. He has done it all himself: “I did it my way”, and his prayer amounts to boastfully listing his achievements before God so that God has nothing to add.

If he has no weaknesses, God cannot strengthen him, if he has no wounds, God cannot heal him, if he has no sins God cannot forgive him. Of course, he does have all these but since he doesn’t acknowledge them he doesn’t let God in. He, in his own mind, is saying, in effect, that he has no need of what God has to offer and while his words look and sound like a prayer, they really only amount to an arrogant boast: “Look at me; see how perfect I am, and all achieved by my own efforts”.

It’s like when the Pharisees criticise Jesus for eating with prostitutes and sinners. He tells them that it is not the healthy who need the doctor but the sick. Because the Pharisees do not accept that they are sick, Jesus cannot help them.

If we are sincere in wanting to let God into our lives, we must first be aware of our weaknesses and our need for his help, that alone and unaided, we can do nothing. This is the true meaning of humility: knowing our need of God. God will respond to the prayer of the humble person like the tax collector in the story. As the first reading puts it today, ‘the humble man’s prayer pierces the clouds’.