

Homily for June 9, 2002  
10th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Hosea 6:3-6  
Romans 4:18-25  
Matthew 9:9-13

## *In Jesus God saves us even from the temptation to think ourselves virtuous.*

During the Napoleonic Wars, a young, battle-weary French soldier fell asleep while on guard duty. He was court marshaled, found guilty and sentenced to death. His widowed mother appealed her son's case to every level of command; in her persistence she managed to attain an audience with the emperor himself. Falling at his feet, the woman begged him to spare her son's life, explaining he was her only child and sole means of support.

"I do not ask for justice," she said, "I plead for mercy."

"Madame, your son does not deserve mercy. He deserves to die," Napoleon said coldly.

The mother immediately replied, "You are right sire, of course. That is why I am asking you for mercy. If he were deserving, he would not need mercy."

The emperor was so touched by the logic of her words that he pardoned the soldier.

Folks, that is precisely the lesson of our gospel, Matthew chapter 9. No one, not even the virtuous, deserves anything. It's all gift – this life – this hoped

for future of unending life. Our good deeds are not the cause, but the consequence of our salvation – there's no way we can be worthy of God's grace, no way we can be worthy of participation in the very love life of God which is what salvation is all about.

The great Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, reminds us, "Love is primarily the work of Christ in me, not simply something that originates in my own will and has been approved and rewarded by God. It is faith that opens my heart to Christ and his Spirit, that he may work in me. No work of mine can be called 'love' in the Christian sense, unless it comes from Christ. But 'the good' are sorely tempted to believe in their own goodness and their own capacity to love, while one who realizes his own poverty and nothingness is much more ready to surrender himself entirely to the gift of love he knows cannot come from anything in himself."

When I pray asking God in such a way as, "Lord, help me to handle this problem," or, "Lord, show me a way to have strength," these ways of praying, while on the surface appearing to be subject to God, are really expressions of my own self-will – I already have an idea of how I want things to work out even in asking the question. But if I pray in another way, if I pray through Jesus to the Father, asking a question along

these lines of Jesus about Jesus, I might pray something like this: "Lord, what was it like for you to have problems you couldn't solve?" And then, at least for an instant, I'm reduced to silence, to listen, to expect, to be open. And God, who can do an awful lot with very little, can invade my heart with God's own spirit – the spirit of the Risen Lord. Then I can begin in some way to act not with my strength but with the strength that comes from God through Jesus Christ.

There was once a certain Monsignor Hulst, who, before his death, is reported to have said something like this: "I have never denied God a moment of my time: I hope he will take that into account." Thomas Merton comments on this and says that this is basically the attitude of Job's friends who tell him that he should have confidence in his piety, and that his life of integrity should give him some assurance. Merton continues and says, "I am thoroughly committed to the position that the words of Eliphaz (in the book of Job) are a blasphemy. Even if I had done some good works to trust in, I would not want to trust in them."

That takes a lot of faith, doesn't it, not to trust in the goodness of our own deeds as having merit in the sight of God. Maybe we all need to spend more time asking Jesus what it was like for him to have problems like ours and then, in faith, be still and listen for God to answer.

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ourselves virtuous.