

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18:

Paul reflects on his faithfulness as he nears the end of his life and looks forward to the reward he will receive, assured that God, who rescued him in the past, even when others deserted him, will bring him safely into God's kingdom.

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus tells a parable about a self-righteous Pharisee, who fails to find a right relationship with God, and a penitent tax collector who finds justification.

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

COCU 62C READINGS

The readings turn back to pretty mainline theological territory - the need for forgiveness, and the necessity for repentance in order to know and receive God's grace. From a conservative perspective, this is the heart of the Gospel - our sinfulness, God's grace, and our need to repent and believe in order to be saved. This is, unfortunately a pretty one-dimensional approach to these passages and the ideas they present. The parable shows the danger in self-righteousness and self-aggrandisement, and there is life to be found when we evaluate ourselves clearly, soberly and with humility enough to recognise our brokenness. Paul, who may at first glance look rather like the Pharisee in his confidence and positive assessment of his life, nevertheless recognises that his life is God's; it is God who has worked - and will continue to work - in him, and he graciously forgives those who abandoned him. And the promise, seen in the Psalm and the Joel reading, is that the grace that the tax collector received is available to all who come to God in brokenness asking for help. While this may seem to have little to do with justice, as we shall see, it actually lies at the very root of it. Firstly, injustice comes through the attitudes that society holds toward the 'greatest' and the 'least'. On the one hand, the poor and vulnerable are seen to be responsible for their own problems. They are thought to be lazy, weak and ignorant and so in some way they are thought to have deserved what life has given them. On the other hand, the powerful and wealthy believe that they deserve what they have because they are somehow better - be it wiser, harder working or whatever. The second role that arrogance plays is in those who work for justice, who also can come to believe that they are somehow better, more noble, more 'righteous' than those who cause injustice (even though they may knowingly or unknowingly be supporting these unjust systems themselves). This "mean streak" among activists often results in nothing more than a polarisation of issues and positions, while the arrogance among the powerful (both activists against and 'perpetrators' of injustice) results in marginalised people being treated with less dignity and humanity, and being controlled or "fixed" by others instead of being given just what is needed, in terms of resources and relationships, to become independent and self-sustaining. Arrogance always robs the other of their humanity and dignity. Humility, on the other hand, results in an openness to the story of the other, to true compassion for the many complex causes of their plight (many of which are beyond their control), and to a commitment to mutual care, learning and collaboration for the benefit of all. This humility opens us to God's Spirit which works among us and in us as we serve one another, and which allows us to experience God's reign among us even now.

(John van de Laar, Sacredise)

Psalm 65

Praise for the God who answers prayer, who forgives sin, who formed the earth and who sends rain to bring an abundant harvest.

You deserve all the credit we can give you, O God.

We will gather and make good on all we have promised you.

You are the one who answers prayers

and everyone on earth will turn to you.

When we are weighed down by our guilt,

you wipe away the record of our wrongs.

What a privilege it is to be among those you call your own;

to be invited to live in your presence.

You take action in awesome ways, O God;

you step in and rescue us when we call.

You are the answer to the hopes of people everywhere,

in every land and across the seas.

You tamed the angry seas,

You lifted the mountains into place.

From one end of the earth to the other,

people are amazed by what you do

Dawn and sunset join their voices,

as all the earth shouts for joy.

Your rivers never run dry, God, and the fields you have plowed yield a bumper harvest to feed your people.

**You tend the earth like a garden,
enriching the soil and keeping it watered.**

You level the uneven ground and nourish the soil;

**you water it with softening showers
and set the seeds growing and flourishing.**

The year is crowned with a bumper harvest

and everything you touch is bursting with life.

**Wilderness fields erupt in flower,
mountains and hills pour forth joy;**

Paddocks are clothed with healthy flocks,
barren land is ablaze with golden grain.

All of them shout for joy; all the earth breaks into song.

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Joel 2:23-32

God promises restoration from the judgement (what the locusts have eaten) and the outpouring of God's Spirit on all of God's sons and daughters.

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.