

Tissot, *The Pharisee and Publican*. 1886

Going to Church is commonly conceded to be a worthwhile activity for many people. It's something we ought to do and are better off for doing it. We go for a variety of reasons—some out of habit, some at the insistence of a friend or family member, some from a sense of duty, and some with a sense of need. Whatever the reason we would agree that something *good* could come from it. People who go to Church invariably have caught a fresh vision of God and have found the courage to go on living; their lives have been transformed; sin has been forgiven and character has been renewed, burdens lifted, responsibilities accepted and hurts have been dedicated to the sacrificial service of the Church and the community. Any one of these could happen to someone who reads this.

Yet, to be fair, there is another side to the story: Going to Church never has been “universally beneficial.” Not all people benefit or are helped; some have been hurt by it, as attested in the Gospel Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Jesus told of two men who went to the Temple to pray. One had a life-changing experience; Jesus said he “went home justified.” That is the first place where going to Church should make a positive difference—at home. However, it was not true of the second person. He went home unforgiven and unforgiving. In fact, he was probably worse off than when he came. What happened to him centuries ago could also happen to you and me.

Going to Church can be reduced to a mere formality for some. Review what the Pharisee was doing: He was praying, but his prayer was no more than recounting his own virtues. And note what he regarded his virtues: the sins he had *not* committed—He had abstained from stealing, cheating and adultery and, on the positive side, he had practiced fasting and tithing. That was it. His entire religion was keeping himself respectable and observing a few rituals. He was simply justifying himself for the moral and ethical message of the Law and the Prophets.

All things can be trivialized. What could be greater

than Handel's "Messiah?" It was performed 278 years ago and has not lost its beauty over the years. But tune your radio to any popular station and you will find the other side of music. It was written yesterday, performed today and will most likely be forgotten tomorrow, when a new song comes along that captures the ear of the people. It's not bad but simply trivial. Not worth handing down to the next generation.

Any great thing can be trivialized. Another example: Astronomy is a great science. It studies the sun, the moon, and the stars. It has changed our concept of our solar system; it has greatly expanded our understanding of the universe. But look at what some have reduced it to: a formula for fortune telling. Just look at the daily newspaper. You find a horoscope that claims to predict the future by studying the stars.

Any great thing can be trivialized. Indeed, nowhere is this more evident than in religion, and our faith is no exception. The world has been given a message of salvation: hearts can be changed; sin can be conquered; love can become the principle of our lives. Many people have taken that message of hope and made it nothing more than a ticket to Heaven.

Christ gave His followers the highest moral and ethical demands that our ears have ever heard: "Love those who hate you ... return good for evil ... do to others as you would have them do to you ... become the servant of the lowest members of society." And what has happened? Many have taken those demands and turned them into a quest for personal peace of mind. They would make the Church a place of escape, an is-

land of safety, or a pillow for their head. They merely want to feel good about themselves as the Pharisee felt good about himself.

Religion can confirm our pride and prejudice. The Pharisee thought himself a superior man; He was "not like the rest of people." He was not challenged in his illusions of grandeur. His sense of religion even served to enhance his pride. Going to the Temple was a righteous thing to do, as well as keeping the hours of prayers. These religious observances were, in his mind, further signs of his superiority. The time of worship made him smaller and more mean spirited than ever. It would have been better for him had he stayed at home.

This aspect of religion is worse than trivial, it is tragic. It can become one of the most destructive factors in human experience. You may recall that Jesus once said: "If the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness be" (Matt 6:23). He was speaking of this very thing. Religion is meant to illumine life, to make us wiser and bigger and kinder. It did it for many people. But when religion goes wrong, it can have the opposite effect.

Someone has said, "Religion is like water. It can refresh the earth, making it beautiful and bountiful or it can flood the earth, leaving ruin and devastation." What effect is it having on your life and mine? Like the Pharisee and tax collector, we have gone "up to the Temple to pray." It is a moment of dangerous opportunity. One went home justified, the other did not. Which will it be for you and me? We would do well to borrow the prayer of the Tax Collector: "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." ❖



What does the *Present* Hold?

As we begin a new year, the question that most readily comes to mind is, “What does the future hold?” We naturally wonder what will happen in the world, our country, the Church, our work places, and our lives in the coming months. Each new year holds a certain amount of promise, a hope that it will be better than the previous year. There are things we hope for and things we dread. If, at year’s end, we find our hopes frustrated or ourselves disappointed, we look anew to the coming year with the same hope that it may be better than the one before.

It is one of the marks of mankind that we look forwards and backwards in our minds and imaginations. We make plans, we learn from mistakes; indeed much of our lives are spent in the past or in the future. In

many ways this is necessary—it is, after all, a part of prudence—but, in other ways, it is a waste of time and energy.

There is the saying that the present is so named because it is a gift from God. While the etymology of the word may be dubious, the message is accurate. God is in the eternal now and, in our lives, we can only find Him in the present. This also goes for His grace. When we imagine future events, we leave out two very important elements: God and His grace. If we wish to live in peace and find joy in our lives, it is crucial to remain with God *in the present*. So let us not ask what the future holds, but seek out what the present holds; nothing less than the divine!

May the Lord bless you with His presence this year!