

MARCH 8, 2025 FATHER VIJAI AMIRTHARAJ

There is this incident told, from the life of Pope Saint John XXIII. One day, when the future pope was the Bishop of Venice, he was told that one of his priests was becoming an alcoholic. "Well, we have to go and visit him," said the bishop to his secretary. And when they got near the presbytery of the priest's parish, the bishop and his secretary stopped at the local hotel, which the priest frequented, and the future pope sent his secretary off, to look for the priest. The secretary came back, and said, "His hat is lying on the table, but he is not there." The future pope answered, "If his hat is there, he must also be there. Go, and look again." And a few minutes later, the secretary came back. He had found the priest at the pub. And all three of them walked over to the presbytery. And there, the bishop offered the priest a chair, and said to him, "Sit down, brother. I want you to hear my confession."

Sisters and brothers, just like the understanding bishop showed kindness and compassion to the priest, Jesus shows kindness and compassion to Levi, the tax collector in today's Gospel. Hippolytus of Rome, one of the theologians of the Early Church, who lived in the Third Century, said, the word leaped down from heaven, into the womb of the Virgin Mary. He leaped from his mother's womb, into the word of the cross. And he leaped from word of the cross, into the underworld, Sheol, to save all. It would be strange if the word became flesh. And kind of stopped, before mingling with the common people, the weak human beings like ourselves. Jesus mixed with everyone, even with the most despised people of his society. As the Gospel says, he mixed not with just one tax collector, but with many. And it was inevitable that the Pharisees would arrive on the scene. They were the ones who were always looking for reasons not to mingle with people. Reasons to exclude people from their inner circle.

And when the Pharisees challenge his unorthodox behaviour, in eating with so-called public sinners, Jesus' defence was quite simple. A doctor does not need to visit healthy people. Instead, they go to those who are sick, those who are in need of healing. And Jesus came as a divine physician, a good shepherd, to care for people who were ill, who were weak, and who were excluded, in order to restore them, and in order to restore wholeness to their lives. The Orthodox Jews were so preoccupied with the ritual practice of their religion, and in the process, and ironically, they neglected to help the very people who needed their support and help in their community.

Sisters and brothers, we have just begun the season of Lent. The season of Lent is a time, not only to examine our relationship with God, but also it is a time to examine our relationship with one another. Especially our attitude, and our approach to people who may ordinarily deserve our judgement and condemnation. Because of their life choices. Because of their uncaring attitude and approach to life. Because of their behaviour that is not good at all, and so on... In our beautiful first reading, the prophet Isaiah points out ways through which we can include people, rather than excluding people. Ways through which we can show compassion and kindness to people, rather than to condemn them and condemn their behaviour. We include people and we show compassion to people by being patient and kind to one another. By lightening the burdens of others. By being sensitive to their material, emotional, and spiritual needs, and so on...

And that is something that we have to grow, especially during this season of Lent. A time given by the Church every year, to examine ourselves, and to re-figure our way of life. And so, we pray that our

journey through Lent during this year may be a journey of growth. A journey of growth, not only in our relationship with God, but also our relationship with our brothers and sisters, in particular, those who are weak and those who are marginalized. Amen.. Amen.