**Reflection – For Sunday 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 23rd October 2022**

**“Oh Lord, it’s hard to be humble – when you’re perfect in every way…” When Mac Davis released the song “It’s Hard to be Humble” in 1980, it became an instant hit. Davis’s song was so popular because it poked fun at those who make themselves out to be better than others. The song isn’t about humility but about pride that dresses itself up as humility. We all need to acknowledge our shadow sides that lurk beneath the surface. The arrogance of “success” is to assume that what you did yesterday will be sufficient for tomorrow. To use a play on words, today’s expert is tomorrow’s leaky drip. Hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue (Francois De La Rochefoucauld).**

**In this weekend’s Gospel, the Pharisee finds it incredibly hard to be humble! In a strongly religious society where the issue of who was right with God through ritual purity and who was not was central, the Pharisee seems the very model of respectability. Convinced of his own righteousness, he compares himself very favorably to everyone else around him; especially to lesser beings who represent the sinful mass of humankind like the tax collector! But the Pharisee has fallen into the trap that well-meaning people of faith are liable to get caught up in unawares. By trusting in his own correctness and regarding others with contempt, the Pharisee illustrates the attitude of those who can only bolster their self-image by putting others down. All the tax-collector can do is beat his breast in an act of remorse: “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner”. For all his faults, the tax-collector’s open admission of guilt is as powerful and profound as it is simple and direct, doing more for him in one moment of clarity than in the Pharisee’s entire lifetime of hypocrisy under the appearance of virtue. Because the Lord is a judge who is no respecter of persons, the tax collector is transformed into a better version of himself through honest self-reflection. The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds.**

**Can we be as real about our own human frailties as the tax collector was about his? If we’re honest, we must admit that there is something of the Pharisee in all of us. Behind any display of rigidity (especially in matters of faith and morals) there is always something hidden which results in what Pope Francis calls “Spiritual Worldliness”, which consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being. If badly applied without a lasting foundation, holiness can be like a brand of make-up that quickly comes off to reveal the gravest moral blemishes. In our second reading, Paul shows us how to avoid spiritual worldliness. Writing to Timothy near the end before his execution, Paul looks back on his life not with fear or regret but with confidence in God’s mercy, as he looks forward to receiving the crown of righteousness reserved for him and for all those who long for the Lord’s appearing. Can we display the same confidence in God’s mercy as Paul did, without giving way to self-righteousness? In the light of Vatican II, the Church’s way of relating with the world has had to evolve from a siege mentality of defensiveness to one of respectful dialogue with all people of good will, of all faiths and none. Our NZ Bishops’ recently published guidelines to Catholic Schools on “Aroha and Diversity” for our youth as they grow to adulthood is a great example of this enlightened attitude. How can we reach out to others with compassion, respect, and sensitivity in the face of diversity as our Bishops would have us do? Without compromising the Church’s rich tradition of moral teaching on sexuality and love in human relationships? Despite the tension between the ideals of the Gospel and our messy human realities, we too can be at rights with God just as the tax collector was. But only if we take the tone of wisdom without condemnation. For whoever exalts themselves will be humbled and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted. Maybe it isn’t so hard to be humble after all.**

***Two men went to the temple to pray  
Was either sincere? I’m unable to say.  
For the temple itself is a stage in a way,  
where people strut, elbow, hawk, kneel, beg and bray.***

***And what’s in the heart – can anyone say?  
Was either man searching his soul on that day?  
Did the innermost man confess or portray  
the angels who guard and the demons who slay?***

***When daily I stand on the stage of my life  
flinching, exposed and thrown into the strife,  
may I act with integrity, speak from the heart  
may the outer and inner be all of one part.***

**(Bill Fulton, *Poem for the Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, 2016)**