

[Spirituality](#)  
[Scripture for Life](#)



Residents are pictured outside their homes May 4, 2020, in a poor section of Manila, Philippines. (CNS/Reuters/Eloisa Lopez)



by Mary M. McGlone

[View Author Profile](#)

[\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

October 21, 2022

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

When Bing Crosby recorded "[Galway Bay](#)," he softened the original lyrics to avoid sounding too political. Rather than indict the English, Crosby sang about potato-farming women who spoke "a language that *the strangers* do not know."

Perhaps without realizing it, Crosby's change permitted the song to resonate with any people whose history includes strangers who, [as the song says](#), "tried to teach us their way," and "scorned us just for being what we are." In the end, the singers proudly proclaim that their vain oppressors "might as well go chasing after moonbeams/Or light a penny candle from a star."

## Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[October 23, 2022](#)

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18

Psalm 34

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

Every culture and faith tradition has its own inside language. Today's readings seem to suggest that God hears some languages better than others. Ben Sirach, the Jewish sage who wrote about 175 years before the time of Christ, wrote with political caution similar to Crosby's. Without mentioning the wealthy, he tells us, "The Lord is not deaf to the cry of the oppressed nor to the widow."

We respond to this reading with Psalm 34. David supposedly composed it after he saved himself from [King Achish](#) by feigning insanity. (He pounded on walls and drooled into his beard, leading the king to decide he was mad.) Just imagine the young David singing, "The Lord hears the cry of the poor," as he was released from Achish's custody ([1 Samuel 21:11-16](#)) What a hymn of praise to the God who is not only attentive but probably truly entertained when powerless tricksters outwit the mighty!

Whether or not Jesus was thinking of Psalm 34 or Sirach, they serve as great lead-ins to his parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisees were the super

religious of their day. Their name indicated that they set themselves apart from ordinary folks as well as from the temple elite. Although their reputation has been disparaged over the ages, that's mostly a factor of "the higher you climb, the harder you fall."

Perhaps we can understand the Pharisees' downfall in a more contemporary light with the help of C.S. Lewis and his classic, *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis, explaining how easy it is for religious people to lose their way, [has a master demon explain](#): "The safest road to Hell is the gradual one — the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones." With this, Lewis explains how the Pharisee of this parable — and anyone else — can gradually slip from wonder before God into thinking that their own perfectionism makes them images of the divine, allowing them to scorn God's beloved poor just for being what they are.

The great scandal of Jesus' parable is that he recognizes holiness in the humility of the tax collector. Although Jesus never taught about the incarnation or Trinity, he claimed to act in the name of the God who not only created the universe, but who identifies with the lowliest and suffers their pain. Jesus' Father is the God who, while knowing "no favorites," continually listens to the cry of the poor.

## Advertisement

The startling implication of this parable may be that the language of the proud reaches God as an unintelligible foreign tongue. The Pharisee spoke his claims to be virtuous into an echo chamber; they were addressed to and comprehended by no one but himself. Jesus' parable underlines a theme from Psalm 1 which proclaims that the wicked are ultimately no more significant than chaff; their deeds and their memory will blow away in a breeze — in the language of the Irish immigrants' song, their luster is less than what a penny candle can fetch from a star.

What are we to learn from this about the language of prayer? Listen to the tax collector: "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." This man did not ask for the kind of "mercy" requested by the lepers who saw Jesus pass their way. The phrase translated here as "be merciful" is more properly interpreted as, "be gracious" or "look upon me with kindness." This man's prayer admits that, before God, we are all beggars longing for God's smile.

Perhaps there's a deep truth about language — and therefore about prayer — in Crosby's song. Only those who have begun to understand God's own humility, only those who understand that love is the one invincible power on earth, can begin to speak God's language.

When we pray, "God, be gracious to me," we are doing nothing more or less than asking God to be God. What greater praise could there be? The only thing left for us to do is to join Mary in saying, "Let your love take flesh in me, according to your will."

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 14-27, 2022** print issue under the headline: The language of prayer.