

Sermon for 23rd October 2022, Year C, Last after Trinity, Proper 25

Preached at All Saints Biddenden

Luke 18:9-14

Sermon

At first glance, our gospel reading today appears to be a simple contrast between one of those nasty, judgemental, self-righteous Pharisees, and a humble, repentant tax-collector.

The gospels are full of such characters, and similar interactions. Jesus famously has a former tax-collector – Matthew – among his disciples, and he criticises Pharisees so frequently that the word has come into the English language to mean anyone who is self-righteous, obsessed with social or religious rules, but totally lacking in compassion and spiritual insight.

These are the images that perhaps now come into our minds when we hear such parables. We have heard the stories enough times to know that the Pharisees are the bad guys, and the tax-collectors tend to be repentant and willing to give up everything to follow Christ.

But this is not how people originally heard such stories. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were largely considered to be the good guys. Surprisingly perhaps, they held to a more liberal interpretation of scripture than the priests in the Temple hierarchy, and their goal was to make the Jewish faith accessible and available to all. It seems to me they might be more like the nonconformists of the Protestant churches – focused on individual piety and personal faith, rather than relying on priestly rituals that potentially kept people at a distance from their God.

In contrast, the tax-collectors were, of course, universally despised. They were not like civil servants, collecting tax with great integrity on behalf of a well-run government. The Roman tax system was more like a franchise of loan sharks. Every tax collector was given a territory and in return they promised to raise a certain amount of cash for the Roman state, but how they raised this money was entirely up to them. They could overcharge however they liked and hire heavies to enforce their demands. It was little wonder that most tax-collectors became very rich and could live much like manor lords in the middle-ages, who were gifted land by the king in return for raising soldiers for battle and filling the king's coffers.

Jesus' parable reverses this normal perspective by highlighting the way the self-congratulatory piety of the good-hearted Pharisee can leave him worse off in God's eyes than the repentance and humility of the despised tax-collector. The shock is not that the tax-collector is a bad man, but that in God's sight, the virtuous Pharisee is actually worse!

The story doesn't quite hit us the same way because we now see Pharisees as domineering & cruel, but it wouldn't have been so in Jesus' day. Many Pharisees, such as Nicodemus, saw in Jesus a kindred spirit and often spent time in his company. They shared Jesus' view that the whole law could be summarised into 'love God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself'.

So what point is Jesus trying to make in his parable? The Protestant reformers saw it as a clear vindication for their view that justification is by grace alone through faith, and not something we can achieve by our own efforts. Several big theological words there – justification, grace, faith – but essentially they're arguing that in God's eyes, everyone has sinned and done wrong, and therefore the more quickly and humbly we accept this and ask for God's forgiveness the better off we are. If we instead insist that we've always done right by everyone,

especially if that makes us feel superior to others, then despite all our good works we'll never be accepted into God's kingdom.

One of the main disagreements between Catholics and Protestants was rooted in this argument about the value of doing good works. Protestants said that it was impossible for any good works to benefit your relationship with God, as demonstrated by God's rejection of the Pharisee in this parable. Only faith in God's forgiveness and compassion could do the job. Catholics however insisted that you must always prove your faith and your repentance by acts of piety and good works. No good works means you have no faith, and no faith means no forgiveness from God. The tax-collector may have gone home justified on account of his humble confession, but if that didn't lead to changed behaviour then his prayers were surely as empty as the Pharisee's.

Protestants & Catholics went on to kill each other over the nuances of this argument for the next few hundred years. Lord, have mercy. They were basically saying the same thing.

But let's make it more personal. What about us? Are we Pharisees or Tax-Collectors? If we're smugly thinking 'Thank God I'm not like either of them' then sadly we have just become like the Pharisee.

To be honest I think it takes something dramatic in our lives for us to gain any kind of true humility. We generally take great pride in ourselves if our lives have been relatively successful and our children have turned out well. And then we look at others who have all kinds of problems and even with the kindest of hearts it's so hard to resist the temptation to feel just a tiny bit superior.

It's possibly only those who've hit what the addiction recovery programs call 'rock bottom' who can entirely accept their need for God's grace and forgiveness. Occasionally, we hear of a selfish and arrogant famous person whose life, after some terrible disgrace or life-changing incident, is transformed into one

of humble service. No one is more able to accept the failings and faults of others so much as someone who has been at rock bottom themselves and been forced to accept that they need forgiveness from a compassionate God who loves them to the core of their being, warts and all.

My sense is that until we reach rock bottom in some way, we remain mostly good-hearted Pharisees, trying to please God through our good works while seeking one another's approval and generally failing to resist the temptation to feel superior to those who seem to us to be failing in life.

Jesus clearly wants his followers to be humble – to demonstrate a complete willingness to accept our need for God – but this is unfortunately not something we can achieve for ourselves. Anyone who tries to be humble like the repentant tax-collector will immediately become proud and self-righteous like the Pharisee. 'Lord, thank you for making me humble, not proud like that awful Pharisee... Oops! Too late!'

For me, humility is the most beautiful and desirable Christian virtue, and yet it is impossible to achieve by our own efforts, which is precisely why it is so beautiful and desirable. Nothing is so Christlike as humility, and yet nothing we can do will get us there.

Holy Saints like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross taught that true Christian virtues like humility can only be asked for, never attained by any effort or spiritual practice. Yes, they offered many techniques of contemplative prayer to deepen people's connection to the divine, but always there was a chasm along the journey between pride and humility, and the only way to cross was to accept that we can't get across by our own efforts. Only God can make us humble, and if we're honest, it's not a path most of us would wish to tread if we understood the cost.

The road to humility is so often filled with suffering. But Jesus wants us to know that if we should ever find ourselves crying out to God for forgiveness, then we are as close to the Father's heart as we could ever be.