

## Sermon 23 October 2016

### The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

I don't like this parable. It makes me feel uncomfortable. For a start I know I am the Pharisee. I look around and thank God I am not as other men are. I am very glad God called me unto the Community of the Resurrection because it made me different; not better, maybe but different. This is what I want to be but then if I read one of the tabloid newspapers I very quickly thank God I am not one of those who would actually spend money to read one of those awful accounts of awful people. Why do people want to read that stuff? However, they do. Why do people want to do the things celebrities do? They do! I think it is rather good that I am not as other men are. Of course I must learn to not to despise them, to feel morally superior to them. I do have failings myself of which I am not very proud. I do need to pray for them and try to understand why people want to behave like that, or read about people who behave like that. This is the condition of humankind which has been going on since men and women first came down from the trees. It is called sin. I really don't want to be part of that.

The trouble is that when I look at the tax collector I find him equally unattractive. All that grovelling, beating of breast, not looking up to heaven, feeling rotten. The parable seems to tell us this is what we should be doing. Well, it's not English. English people don't go in for public displays like that. When we English people of my generation feel we should do something about penitence we get hold of the Prayer Book. There's all that marvellous penitential stuff which Cranmer wrote: "We have erred and strayed from our ways like lost sheep; we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts... There is no health in us but thou O Lord have mercy on us, miserable offenders". The trouble with Cranmer's stuff is that it's so good. It's really lovely speaking out those beautiful rhythms, that wonderful rhetoric. It's a bit like watching a Shakespeare tragedy. By the time we get to the end we have wept out our sins and feel quite marvellous. I'm not sure, though, whether it is real sorrow for sin, or sheer joy of the glorious language that is masquerading as repentance.

What Jesus is saying is that I must **want** to be like the tax collector and I can't want to be like the tax collector without a huge amount of grace, a good kick from God and a new insight into his condition. Being penitent has to look attractive before I can want to be it. Can we make it look good? I believe we can.

I hate going to the dentist. I have always been frightened of dentists. I sit down in the chair with a sense of doom as if it were an electric chair. I am terrified he will find something wrong but if I actually have toothache then I rush to the dentist. I beg for an emergency appointment. I leap into the chair with a feeling of gratitude to this marvellous man who is going to take away the pain. When he does, I am thrilled. Do you see the point? If we don't really think about our sin and realise how bad it is, how destructive it is, then we won't see the point of the tax collector's grovelling. If we do understand about sin and how bad it is for us, we will do anything to get rid of it and get back to God.

Nervous breakdowns, or burn-outs, are really horrible things. They usually come at the end of a time of great stress, overwork or too much play. Life has gone mad and there is no keeping hold of it. In the end the body revolts and collapses. Yet most people who have experienced this will say afterwards it was the best thing that ever happened to them. That was when they had to stop and consider life, work out their priorities, make a new life. That was probably the time when life began to make sense and real joy entered their lives.

Anyone who has done the Ignatian Exercises will remember the First Week experience, the week on sin. Day after day you immerse yourself in the sin of the world, the sin of people around you and of course, your own sin. It sounds grim and in many ways it is grim. You face up to just how sinful you are, and how awful is this sin in the face of a loving God. You see the consequences of sin, the way it pervades society. You see how your own sin rejects the goodness that God is trying to share with us. Can anything be worse than that? Yet as the experience goes on you find it rather wonderful, to see the truth of life, the truth of why things go wrong, the truth that this is what we choose and if we choose it we can also **not** choose it. There is another way of living life and we can choose that. Really understanding the causes of sin and the nature of sin makes us deeply penitent and makes us long to escape from it. We realise that we don't have to stay there. Just a little way ahead is freedom and joy. It is wonderful if we can, like the tax collector, say "Lord, have mercy" but we don't have to stay there, saying no more than "Lord, have mercy". God is waiting to take us on another journey of love, of life, of light. We may never entirely escape from sin in this world but that new life is still there waiting for us when we turn around and accept it. That makes the tax collector's role attractive, to realise that just beyond that 'Lord, have mercy' there is freedom and joy.

To say 'Lord have mercy on me a sinner' from the heart is, of course, real humility. This is admitting the truth of our life. The truth is that we are not the fantastic people we sometimes think we are, the amazing people we would like to be. We are all really quite ordinary. As long as we try to be what we are not we will be unhappy. Humility means accepting who we are and finding it is OK. Some of you will remember in the first Harry Potter story Harry discovers the Mirror of Erised, a mirror which shows you what you most deeply desire. It is a dangerous mirror because it makes you think you can acquire what you desire, that it really exists. Dumbledore tells Harry, "A completely happy person, looking into this mirror will simply see himself". That is why properly humble people are happy and secure. They don't have to live up to a false image or keep an untrue story about themselves going. They can simply be who they are, who God wants them to be.

That is the real source of the joy. There is no such thing actually as an ordinary person. CS Lewis, in one of the Narnia stories, has Prince Caspian complain that he comes from a lineage of thieves and pirates. He would like something more honourable. Aslan tells him, it is enough, for "You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve ...and that is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth". When we have the humility to face up to who we really are we will discover that the truth is far more exciting, far more wonderful than the most extravagant fantasy. We are created by God, loved by God. God's own Son died for us because he loved us and he offers us the most glorious life with him.

The real truth of the parable we heard today comes home to us: the Pharisee is wrapped up in himself and his own virtue. He doesn't really talk to God; or he regards God as a kind of member of the same club, he and God are kind of better class people than the ordinary run of humanity. He will never discover the glorious truth of human nature, since he doesn't need it. The tax collector will discover it, if he moves on from his breast beating and accepts the gifts that God is longing to give him.