

## The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2016

<sup>9</sup> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus introduces us to two men, both of whom have come along to the temple to pray. The two men illustrate two completely different ways of approaching God and there is a great shock for his listeners, both then and now.

The first one is a Pharisee. The Pharisees were the people who took the Old Testament very seriously trying to observe the whole law (all 613 commandments). They were prime examples of very religious people and probably someone you would want to be coming along to church.

The other, well, the less said about him the better. He’s a tax collector. Why is it that people who work for HM Revenue and Customs always seem to get a bad press and how many of us will admit to having friends who are tax collectors today? They were not very popular in Jesus’ day either. They were liked even less because to be a tax collector meant working for the Romans. You’re a Jew living in the Promised Land but this tax collector is working for the army who defeated you, taking your money and giving it to Caesar (along with a healthy proportion for himself).

So we have these two men, arriving at the temple and we can listen in to their prayers. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector”.

He’s praying, but who is he praying to? Himself! He’s praising himself, while at the same time doing down others. It’s all about me, myself and I. His first sentence compares himself to other people, and unsurprisingly, he finds that he’s better than everyone else! He looks around and sees all these evil sinners, but he’s better than that, or so he thinks.

The problem is that he does not compare himself to perfection, to the perfect obedience of Jesus. He fails to see how he has fallen short.

His second sentence then focuses on the good religious practices he does - fasting and tithing. But again, it seems that he's saying look at me! Remember the context of the parable - Jesus is telling it to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. Can they see themselves in this Pharisee?

Can we see ourselves there too? While we might not come out and say it out loud, there can be some times when we think these sort of things in our heart. We have a tendency to think better of ourselves and worse of others. We always come out with a better opinion about ourselves.

The second man's prayer isn't as long and contains just seven words: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' He's standing far off, he doesn't even look up, he beats his breast. He recognises his sinfulness - not just the things he has done wrong but his very nature of being a sinner. He knows he doesn't deserve anything and so he begs for mercy from God. A full recognition of who he is, and a cry for God to be full of mercy.

The point the Pharisee missed and that we often miss is quite simple. God wants as we are and not how we think he wants us. He wants us to present ourselves to him as we are and then allow him to mould us into what he wants us to be. Where the tax collector scores lots of points is that he knows exactly who and what he is and is asking God for help to be a better person.

"But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"

In the Eastern Orthodox Church this parable is read as part of the preparatory period leading up to Lent. It provides an example of the humility which should be practiced during the Lenten period and includes a hymn inspired by the parable:

Let us flee from the pride of the Pharisee!  
And learn humility from the Publican's tears!  
Let us cry to our Saviour,

Have mercy on us,  
Only merciful One!

This parable and teaching from St Luke is probably the source of the Jesus prayer which many Christians, again mainly amongst our Eastern Orthodox friends, use as a sort of mantra,

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Sin is a concept that the Church is increasingly finding difficult to deal with in today’s society where the uncomfortable and challenging is not welcome. It is used by evangelicals as a stick to beat each other with and by liberal catholics as a technical term to cover the uncomfortable things we don’t like talking about, which covers most of the problems in our world.

Rather like the Pharisee and the tax collector, we have a choice. The choice is a sort of spiritual fight or flight situation. The psychologists tell us that,

“When your body goes into a state of stress, we may feel agitated and aggressive towards others; this can be due to our bodies’ natural reaction being “fight”. This can be a helpful reaction to ward off predators, but in unnecessary situations, it can negatively affect relationships and ruin reputations.

Some of us avoid our stressors, removing ourselves from the situation instead of tackling it. This can be a sign of the “flight” survival instinct; a function that can save our lives if we find ourselves in dangerous surroundings. However, in everyday life, this natural instinct can lead to a stressful situation escalating, and increase our stress levels when we realise that the stressor isn’t going away and we need to face it.”

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector”. That is a form of spiritual flight- running away from the reality of the situation by hiding behind the shortcomings of others to make us feel better. Not to be recommended as it will only confound and complicate the situation by allowing a flight from reality.

‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ That is a fight situation, it could be argued. Not a fight in physical terms but a facing up to reality.

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Perhaps this is a mantra that we might like to adopt in our lives as a part of our personal spirituality. Perhaps the real difference between these two people is that one, the Pharisee, thought he was not really part of the real world and lived partly in his own while the tax collector was not sure at all about where he was in the world but was prepared to take his chance where God was concerned.

Sorry, but no- body ever said that being a Christian was easy!

Amen.