

2022 23rd OCTOBER – WORSHIP AT HOME – HUMBLE HEARTS AND MINDS

Dear friends,

Today we think about one of Jesus' parables which would have shocked his audience – a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector praying. Jesus suggests to his audience that a tax collector who humbles himself is made right with God, while the Pharisee is self-righteous and distances himself. Jesus teaches that we are to be humble before God and to recognise that we are all equal before God. That will surely affect how we interact with others [and not just our friends].

I hope that you are well as we approach the late autumn. With every blessing, Margaret.

Call to worship: We meet in the presence of God who creates us in love – who redeems us through faith – and who sustains us with hope.

We come to him with joy and with sorrow, sad at our failings, grateful for God's acceptance.

May we know God with us in our various homes as we join in our worship.

Lord, as we come to worship, help us to do so with humility

Help us to see ourselves as we are, and to remember before you that we are weak without your power – lost without your guidance – that we are nothing without you.

But with you all things are possible.

God of grace, we come as we are –

in peace, or maybe in pieces,

in hope, or perhaps in hopelessness.

We know that you see our true selves, even when we do not.

Holy One, father, Spirit, Son, we long to be in your presence, to sing for joy to the living God.

We pray all these prayers in the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

The words to 'This is the day'. Singing the Faith 152.

This is from a Fijian folk melody and is arranged by Paul Leddington Wright [b.1951]

1 This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made.

We will rejoice, we will rejoice, and be glad in it, and be glad in it.

This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made.

2 This is the day, this is the day when he rose again, when he rose again.

We will rejoice, we will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it.

This is the day when he rose again, we will rejoice and be glad in it.

This is the day, this is the day when he rose again.

3 This is the day, this is the day when the Spirit came, when the Spirit came.

We will rejoice, we will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it.

This is the day when the Spirit came, we will rejoice and be glad in it.

This is the day, this is the day when the Spirit came.

Prayers:

Beautiful God, you astound us with your love and grace, with your abundant welcome and your faithfulness.

You are constant and ever present. We will worship you today and will ever sing your praise. **Amen.**

Forgive us, Lord, when we look down on others and judge ourselves to be better than them.

Forgive us when we equate success with superiority – when we mistake self-centredness for self-esteem and we see ourselves as more than we truly are.

Forgive us, and bless us, with a grounded knowledge of both our strengths and our weaknesses, that we may serve you in humility and truth. We ask this in Jesus' name. **amen.**

God forgives all who are genuinely sorry, cleanses our hearts and makes us new.

Lord, we cherish your grace which gives us a new start – and we pray that we may honour your name.

Merciful God, we thank you for your care for us and that you love us when we are honest before you. We thank you that we can bring ourselves before you in the full knowledge that you know us, you hear our sincerest cries – and that you care for each one of us. **Amen.**

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Luke 18: 9-14 – The story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: [Translation by William Barclay]

Jesus told the following parable which was meant for some people who were so confident of their own goodness that they looked with contempt on everyone else. Two men went up to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood there, and this was his prayer, and it was addressed quite as much to himself as it was to God: 'O God, I thank you that I am not like other people – rapacious, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax-collector here. I fast twice a week. I meticulously set aside for you a tenth of my income.'

The tax-collector respectfully kept his distance and would not even look up to heaven. So far from that, he beat his breast and said: 'God! have mercy on me, the sinner!'

I tell you, he went home far closer to God than the other, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but, if a man humbles himself, he will be exalted.

Meditation of a listener to the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-collector.:

Was it even a prayer, the cry of the tax-collector?

Think about it: he refused to approach God, wouldn't even look towards heaven so great was his sense of unworthiness – his utter guilt and shame.

Don't ask me what he was meant to have done, but it was clearly nothing to be proud about, and the fellow knew it.

The Pharisee, by contrast, may have been a touch self-righteous – smug, even – but give him his due, he would have observed the Law to the letter, scrupulous in every detail.

Can you really ask for more than that?

Tell me, which of the two would you have kept company with, given the choice?

Which would you have trusted with your money – your children – your life?

Do I need to ask?

No, the Pharisees have their faults, certainly, but they are devout, they are upright, God-fearing – decent and respectable folk like you and me.

So what was Jesus thinking of, telling a story like that?

Honestly, he'll give religion a bad name with such talk, as if all our dutiful devotion can somehow be worth less than a single cry from the heart.

Surely not even *he* can mean that!

Can he?

Comment

In a way, this week's story could be funny if it were not so serious once truly analysed. Unfortunately, there are still a lot of people these days who have the same kind of attitude as that Pharisee had – though we should never stereotype all Pharisees as bad for – as in every walk of life – there are good ones and bad.

Apparently – as I read in Sermon Illustrations by David Adam – the rabbis themselves listed all sorts of Pharisees. There was the God-loving Pharisee, who lived by faith and was full of good works – and there were many of these good men.

Then there were the Fearing Pharisees, who were so worried about the wrath of God that they knew very little of his love. The Bleeding Pharisees took the law that a rabbi should not speak to any woman in the street [not even his wife or his mother!] to a ridiculous level. To ensure that they kept even more closely to this rule, some Pharisees closed their eyes in the street so that they couldn't even see a woman! Naturally, they were always bumping into things and hurting themselves – hence the 'bleeding' part of the name.

The Hump-backed Pharisees walked bent almost double in pretend humility – they were 'ever so 'umble', rather like Uriah Heep [in Dickens' *David Copperfield*]

The Wait-a-whiles always found an excuse for putting things off till another day while the Shoulder Pharisees liked their devotion to religion to be seen, so that they would be praised for it. Finally, there were the Ever-Reckoning Pharisees who added up their good deeds and struck up a sort of balance account with God – as if they could make him indebted to them!

Here Jesus told the story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector to warn those who thought they were righteous and held others in contempt. Jews said their prayers three times a day at 9am, at noon, and at 3pm, and they believed that it was better to pray in the Temple.

It would seem that this Pharisee was a member of two groups – he like people to see him practising his religion and so praise him, and he appeared to set up his own account with God. Indeed, we are told that he prayed 'with himself' not 'by himself' and we can see just how self-centred he was.

'God, I thank you that I am not like other people.....I fast.....I give.' That man was at the centre of his prayers, not God. It was as if he declared that God was indebted to him!

From the beginning of the story, many people listening would have wondered just what the tax collector thought he was doing, praying there in the Temple. Just who did he think he was? After all, he had made himself unclean and unworthy by working for the Roman army. He was lucky that no-one had kicked him out! This man could not even raise his eyes to heaven, as if he dared not – and many of Jesus' listeners would have thought that was as it should be.

The tax collector could only beat his breast and say: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'.

It is God – in his grace and goodness – who is in control – it is God who is active. The tax collector addresses God as the subject and sees himself as the object as he asks for mercy.

Indeed, he is the object of God's love and mercy.

Jesus kept the punch line till the end. The translation in The Message [Eugene Peterson]] puts it this way: "This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

Prayers:

God, the giver of all good gifts, we pray for those in need.

For all who struggle to believe, grant faith.

For all who find it hard to do the right thing, grant righteousness.

For all who falter in their weakness, grant strength.

For all who are too impetuous, grant patience.

For all who are fearful of relationships, grant love.
For all who long for a way out of the gloom, grant joy.
For all who are exhausted with life, grant peace. **Amen.**

Lord Jesus, help us to pray even when we have no words. We come as we are, just at this moment, with all our mixed-up feelings and fears – our anger, guilt, hope, thankfulness.
We bring to you our relationships, joy and heartache, our confusion, plans, responsibilities.
Lord, help us to pray, even though we cannot always find the words – and may your will be done in our lives. **Amen.**

Illustration from Sermon Illustrations by David Adam:

The outside of the house looked well in the twilight The white-washed walls seemed to shine, and even more so in the moonlight. Then during the night it snowed and we awoke to a bright morning. How shabby the outside of the house looked against the brightness of the snow and the sunlight – it certainly needed a coat of paint. How we are depends on what, or whom, we compare ourselves with – when we are placed before the holiness and grace of God, all that we can truly say is: ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’

The words to ‘Who would true valour see’ written by John Bunyan [1628-1688]. Singing the Faith 486

1 Who would true valour see, let him come hither;
one here will constant be, come wind, come weather;
there’s no discouragement shall make him once relent
his first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

2 Whoso beset him round with dismal stories
do but themselves confound; his strength the more is.
No lion can him fright; he’ll with a giant fight;
but he will have the right to be a pilgrim.

3 Hobgoblin nor foul fiend can daunt his spirit;
he knows he at the end shall life inherit.
Then fancies flee away, he’ll fear not what men say;
he’ll labour night and day to be a pilgrim.

Closing Prayer:

Lord, we bring you our unbelief, that you may give us faith;
our self-reliance, that we may learn to trust;
our self-satisfaction that we may be changed;
our weakness, that we might be made strong;
our emptiness, in order to be filled;
our trust, that we might be sent;
our love, that you might commission us to serve.
We bring you our lives and make our commitment.
We ask for your presence and to be filled with your Spirit. **Amen.**