

Dear friends,

Firstly, I am sorry that this offering is somewhat late this week. Before coming to it I had to prepare a service and sermon – and just as I reached very close to the end I pressed something which presumably I should not have – and I lost everything, even the stuff I had saved as I went along!! So it all had to be done again – as well as running the coffee morning etc. Therefore – apologies for the lateness.

Two short passages this week – one from Paul's second letter to Timothy and the other from Luke's Gospel. As always, I wish you all well and send you every blessing. *Margaret*

Call to worship:

Creator God – though you have cast each one of us from the one mould that is your love, we are a wealth of different shapes and sizes – of varying strengths and weaknesses.

Help us to see ourselves as one family and not to distance ourselves either from those to whom we feel inferior, or from those whom we feel are beneath us.

For in you we are one – loved, forgiven and redeemed by your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

May the light of God's truth infuse the darkness of our pride – the truth of God's reality enrich the smallness of our thinking – and the enormity of God's love enrich our lives, embolden our worship and unite us in faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The words to 'Fight the good fight' written by John Samuel Bewley Monsell [1811-1875] StF 634

1 Fight the good fight with all your might;
Christ is your strength and Christ your right;
lay hold on life, and it shall be
your joy and crown eternally.

2 Run the straight race through God's good grace,
lift up your eyes and seek his face;
life with its way before you lies;
Christ is the path, and Christ the prize.

3 cast care aside; upon your guide
lean, and his mercy will provide;
lean, and the trusting soul shall prove
Christ is its life, and Christ its love.

4 Faint not nor fear, his arm is near;
he changes not, and you are dear;
only believe, and prove it true
that Christ is all in all to you.

Prayer including the Lord's Prayer:

Eternal Father, whose love echoes throughout history, we adore your holy name.

Risen Son, who never leaves or forsakes us, we adore you in your perfect presence.

Holy Spirit, who comforts and counsels us, we adore your spirit of enlightenment and encouragement. Amen.

Dearest Lord, in this world we rely heavily on the approval, validation and comfort of others.

But sometimes we find ourselves in situations where it seems as if everyone has deserted us.

We confess that, at such times, we often forget our faith – we don't turn to you, the one who has promised to be with us always.

Yet you are there, not in the shadows, not in the wings waiting for your cue to step in and play your part, but right there, by our side, just waiting for us to notice.

So, Lord, we remind ourselves that we are never alone, never abandoned, and we commit ourselves to fighting the good fight to remain faithful, as you are ever faithful to us. Amen.

Father, you forgive us when our faith has been shaken, and we are cast down by things beyond our control. You are there to comfort and restore us in every situation. You forgive us for forgetting this, and raise us up to fight again in faith, knowing that you are by our side.

Your forgiveness rescues and redeems us from despair. Amen.

O Lord, we thank you for your presence in our lives, especially at times when we feel forsaken.

We thank you for the feeling of not being alone – of being uplifted by an unseen power who causes us to rise up in faith and face life again. Thank you, Lord, for sustain us in all situations, and encouraging us to fight the good fight in your name and for your sake. 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 who 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.

Both Bible passages are taken from Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Wheaton, Illinois 60189 USA]

2 Timothy 4: 6-8 & 16-18

Taken from Paul's Final Words: 'As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me – the crown of righteousness that the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that great day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his glorious return.

The first time I was brought before the judge no-one was with me. Everyone had abandoned me. I hope it will not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me and gave me strength, that I might preach the Good News in all its fullness for all the Gentiles to hear. And he saved me from certain death. Yes, and the Lord will deliver me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly Kingdom. To God be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Comment: As he approaches the end of his life, Paul doesn't see himself as the victim of other people's desertion [though he mentions them in 4:10-16]. He prefers to imagine himself as wine or other precious liquid being poured on the earth as a sacrificial offering. Like Jesus, he has given himself away for others, in particular the Gentiles who have received the Gospel through him. He is like a soldier and an athlete in [perseverance and single-mindedness. He is proud of what he has achieved, but without losing sight of the One he serves. The 'reward' is not Paul's to deserve, but the Lord's to give, when God's kingdom appears in its fullness – and then not only to Paul, but to all who have served as he has. References to God's sustaining strength are summed up here in verse 17. This

is the source of Paul's irrepressible courage and confidence. He ensures always that he points beyond himself, not at himself. If he expects to be martyred soon, Paul can hardly believe that he will always be rescued from the risks of apostolic ministry. His enduring hope, and his experience of the powerful presence of God when he is abandoned by colleagues he might have relied on, to show that he is reliably rescued from despair rather than danger. As he puts it elsewhere in 2 Corinthians 4: 10,16 – '[we are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.....So we do not lose heart.'

Luke 18: 9-14.

Then Jesus told this story to some who had great self-confidence and scorned everyone else. "Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a dishonest tax collector. The proud Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially like that tax collector over there! For I never cheat, I don't sin, I don't commit adultery. I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.'

But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying: 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.' I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For the proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honoured."

Comment:

This familiar parable relies on well-worn stereotypes. Pharisees have a reputation as shining examples of faithfulness to God's Law [despite Luke's rather negative representation of them.] Tax collectors are dishonest collaborators who transfer Jewish wealth to the Roman occupation. The Pharisee's life has much to commend it – he is prayerful, observant and generous. But the tax collector feels that he has no goodness to speak of - what they both have in common is that they have allowed their reputations to go to their heads. The Pharisee's piety tips over into self-centred achievement as it inflates his ego – notice how many times he says 'I'. The tax collector's self-interest feeds his guilty conscience: he can only throw himself on God's mercy. Because Jesus looks to the heart as the source of true righteousness, he sees the man who feels he has nothing to offer as the one who truly experiences God's acceptance.

Meditation of a listener to the parable. [A Most Amazing man – Year C. Copyright 2009 Nick Fawcett]

Was it even a prayer, that 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'd 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, 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?*

Prayer: Lord Jesus, forgive us, for we fail you time and again, betraying and denying your love.

We are weak, stubborn, proud, foolish, false and faithless in so much.

Cleanse us from our faults for they are ever before us.

Have mercy, Lord, have mercy upon us all. Amen. [Copyright 2009 Nick Fawcett]

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We must not stereotype all Pharisees as bad, as in all groups of people there are good and bad. The rabbis themselves listed all sorts of Pharisees.

- 1) There was the God-loving Pharisee, who lived by faith and was full of good works. There were many of these.
- 2) There was the Fearing Pharisee who was worried about the wrath of God and knew little of his love.
- 3) Then there were the Bleeding Pharisees. No Jewish rabbi was supposed to speak to a woman in the street, not even his wife or mother. The Bleeding Pharisees took it further by closing their eyes in the street so as not to see a woman. As a result, they were always bumping into things and hurting themselves.
- 4) Then came the Hump-Backed Pharisees who walked bent almost double in pretend humility – like Uriah Heep.
- 5) The Wait-a – While Pharisees always found an excuse for putting things off to another day.
- 6) The Shoulder Pharisees were those who wore their religion to be seen and to gain praise.
- 7) The last group were the Ever Reckoning Pharisees who added up their good deeds and struck up a kind of balance account with God – as if they could put him into debt!

I think the Pharisee in the parable was most likely from group 7

Prayer: A Prayer of Petition

Lord, far away from your presence I whisper your name.

I don't really know how I came to be here.

Without you, I count for nothing.

Be merciful to me, O God.

Take away my self-seeking and help me to serve you.

Let me put others first and care for my neighbour.

Help me to live as though your kingdom were already here.

May your name be glorified today and forever. Amen.

Close:

Go with God, encouraged by his presence.

Go and look for him in the joys and in the sorrows.

Go and share his love with others.

Go in the knowledge that he stands beside you.

Go in peace. Amen,

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