

Sermon Sunday 12th February 2023

Isaiah 66 1-6 and Luke 18 9-14

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

In the parables Jesus often mentions people who His disciples and people listening to Him will recognise. Today's reading from Luke is no different, as both the characters will be well known to His listeners.

We have two contrasting characters today in the parable Jesus is telling His disciples; the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee is a Jewish lawyer who interpreted what the O.T. actually meant and resolved issues which could arise. On paper a respected, upright member of the Jewish community.

The tax collector, who collected taxes for the Romans and would always have an armed guard to protect him and the money collected. On paper he was despised by all, often fiddling the books for his own profit.

So, what is Jesus trying to tell us in this parable? It is about prayer but more importantly how we pray. In Isaiah 6:3 we are given a clue 'THIS IS THE ONE I ESTEEM, HE WHO IS HUMBLE AND CONTRITE IN SPIRIT, AND TREMBLES AT MY WORD.' Jesus returns to His Jewish roots in the O.T. to tell His disciples how Isaiah was telling the people at that time that God shows mercy to the humble but he curses the proud and self-sufficient. Which of our two characters is which?

We are told the two men went to the Temple to pray. This could be early morning or mid-afternoon. However, prayer is unlike the private devotions we make to God today. It means prayer and worship in Semitic speech where the word to pray combines what we tend to now separate into prayer and Sunday worship, for example. In the Temple there would have been a service involving sacrifice of a lamb for atonement of Israel's sins and singing, along with other rituals. Jews who could not attend would offer up their prayers at the same time as the Temple worship.

So how does the Pharisee pray? He stood apart as he did not want to touch others who would make him unclean and he would have to wash and change. He prayed where he could be seen and heard however, he

prayed about himself. LUKE 18 VERSE 11 ‘GOD, I THANK YOU I AM NOT LIKE OTHER MEN – ROBBERS, EVILDOERS, ADULTERERS OR EVN LIKE THIS TAX COLLECTOR. I FAST AND GIVE A TENTH OF ALL I GET.’ Prayer in first century Judaism was three types:

Confession

Thanks for bounty received and

Petitions for oneself

None of the pharisee’s prayers fall into any of these categories

As a pharisee he should have known this but out of arrogance he did not; his prayers were in the category I think of ‘aren’t I wonderful God. ‘

The tax collector chooses to stand apart and look down, which was the accepted stance for prayer, along with crossing your arms over the chest. Yet we are told he beat his breast, a common practice in eastern religions. He was seeking atonement for his sins. Atonement comes ing from the Greek word hilaskomai meaning making an atonement for sin. As the service came to an end, HE CRIED OUT GOD HAVE MERCY ON ME A SINNER OR O LORD MAKE AN ATONEMENT FOR ME, in the Greek.

So, what do we take from this parable?

1. **RIGHTEOUSNESS.** A relationship that is right with God is a gift from God that comes through atonement or seeking forgiveness not achievable by observance of the law alone.
2. **ATONEMENT.** God’s grace cannot be received by the worshipper who is arrogant, judgemental and self-satisfied.
3. **A PATTERN FOR PRAYER.** A humble yearning for Gods unearned grace is an authentic aspect of genuine prayer.
4. **THE PERVERSION OF PERCEPTION.** Self-righteousness distorts visions of ourselves, God and our neighbour.
5. **THE RECIPIENT OF THE SACREMENTS.** Only those who sense their unworthiness in presence of God’s offered grace can approach God’s holiness and receive that grace from Him.
6. **LINKING WORD AND SACREMENT/baptism or the eucharist.** This is critical, whenever the two words are not linked or separated

serious problems occur. So, pray and worship when you come to communion, perhaps using the words from Common Worship/the Book of Common Prayer 'JESUS IS THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD. BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE CALLED TO HIS SUPPER. And the response 'LORD I AM NOT WORTHY TO RECEIVE YOU, BUT ONLY SAY THE WORD AND I SHALL BE HEALED.' This has echoes of the tax collector's prayer as he considers himself unworthy; however we know God listens and answers prayers and grants forgiveness, to the truly humble.

So, who won between the pharisee and tax collector? Jesus gives us the answer. VERSE 14 'I TELL YOU THAT THIS MAN, RATHER THAN THE OTHER, WENT HOME JUSTIFIED BEFORE GOD. FOR EVERYONE WHO EXALTS HIMSELF WILL BE HUMBLD AND HE WHO HUMBLD HIMSELF WILL BE EXALTD.'

Amen