

St Edmundsbury Cathedral 14th July 2019
Year C — Last Sunday after Trinity
Luke 18.9-14
The Parable of The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

May I speak in the name of the one who loves us, who sustains us and who gives us life. Amen.

So... the story of the tax-collector and the pharisee. If you listen... you might just hear the booing and the hissing at the baddies in the pantomime? the pharisees... those self-righteous legalistic religious hypocrites... and the tax-collectors... well they're collaborators, furthering the cause of the powerful... you know, cheats on the make at the expense of others...

although, actually, if we're familiar with other Gospel stories we might concede to a need see tax collectors in a slightly different light ... Jesus did eat with them, after all... he called Matthew, a tax collector to be his disciple, looked up to Zaccheus who had climbed high into a tree... and in this parable, the tax collector seems to be genuinely repentant... so perhaps they're not so bad...

and anyway.... much better to be a humble tax collector than a proud pharisee...

I can almost hear the silence descend upon us...

And there we have it.

Our efforts to position ourselves on "the right side" find us caught in a quandary.

As the self-righteous pharisee seeks to distance themselves from the tax collector so we too, find ourselves behaving in the same, somewhat superior manner as we attempt to distance ourselves from the pharisee as we aspire to become the tax collector.

'God, thank you that I am not like other people...' sometimes I've caught myself phrasing it like this.... 'I'm alright thanks... it's all them other.... people'.... or perhaps "there but for the grace of God go I"... is it really God's grace that meant that I was not the one in the a refrigerated container on the back of a lorry last week?

What a tangled and complicated mess is revealed as we discover that we are neither one, nor the other... but both... we are both pharisee and tax collector. Resident and migrant. Slave and free. Sinner and saint.

Repentant tax-collector... notice how we like to focus on the repentant... but remember that the tax collector has much to repent over... as surely do we...

And there is much about the pharisee that we ignore as we zoom-in on hypocrisy and self- righteousness... notice how quickly we dismiss the pharisee's desire to take faith seriously?

Even with the best of intentions it seems that we end up diminishing others — setting ourselves apart in an attempt to shore ourselves up, either by rehearsing aloud our qualities and strengths or by outwardly martyring our inner-unworthiness. Behaviours that we discover are true of our churches, as much as individuals.

You'll have seen and heard it on the street, in the shops, at school... perhaps we can recall occasions when we have joined in... the eye rolling when someone else is talking, "dressing for success", holding others responsible for our own shortcomings or disappointments.

Yet here we are this morning, with our inner pharisee and our inner-tax collector buried deep within..., wrestling, perhaps, with the complexity of the "unacceptable" aspects of ourselves which disconnect with the acceptable face that we willingly project.

The characters in this parable, it seems have much to teach us about ourselves.... and like them, we too have "come up to the temple to pray".

Pharisee and tax collectors, you and I, we are all welcome in this place.

I wonder, what we might receive from being in this prayerful place...

Well that is where the parable has much to teach us about God.

For the keeping of prayerful routines and practices of worship has many purposes... one of which is to help us to shift our perspective, away from ourselves and towards God, that through word and silence and music and the sharing of the bread and the wine, an intimacy might be created whereby we might experience something of the merciful nature of God, and that convicted of our need for mercy we might be humble before God... finding our right place, our right-relationships among one another and with our Creator so that we dare begin to live integrated and flourishing lives even in the most challenging of circumstances.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas asks "have you ever known anyone who has successfully humbled themselves?" Humility happens to us, it is not something we set out to achieve for ourselves. For Hauerwas there is "no humility without humiliation". Not humility achieved as a result of coercion or control or power....no, humiliation here, in this place, is the recognition and acceptance of who we are in relation to the Creator, the process by which we are made humble. I dare say it is this attitude that makes righteousness possible.

Humiliation is often what the world thirsts for as we long to see people being taken down a peg or two, especially when we pharisees and tax collectors compare ourselves one with another... who is better? Psychologists tell us that humility is about emotional neutrality and an understanding that we no longer need to put ourselves above others... nor below them either, for everyone is our peer... from the pulpit I might put it 'that we are all worthy in the sight of God'. Made worthy through the mercy and humiliation that is found when we simply acknowledge that God is God. In recognising that we are all God's people shifts our perspective and offers us a glimpse of holiness... a wholeness that we find when our lives are fully integrated... tax collector and pharisee in a right-relationship with the creator that makes it possible to be a disciple of Christ.

As we celebrate the Eucharist today we remember Christ's humiliation on the cross, the merciful God who has made it possible for us to gather around the table that we might be sustained through bread and wine. I concede, in that very brief moment... we might just allow ourselves to "thank God that we are not like other people", we are Christians... we are followers of Christ. People brought to their knees, willing to bow our heads and to admit to what we are as we lift our faces to heaven that we might begin to reflect what we shall be, as in His presence we are transformed by the merciful humiliation of God.

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