

St Andrew's Sermon Sunday 27 October 2019

Trinity 19; 2 Timothy 4-6, 16-18; Luke 18, 9-14

Today I want us to think about contrasts. You can also think of contrasts; young and old, men and women, light and dark, night and day and so on. My son started his education at Westminster City school. But after a few years it became clear that all was not going well. I talked to a friend on Sunday who said he had been a teacher of music there and that the school was really rough. My son complained that he was being bullied. Nothing seemed to stop it so he took matters into his own hands and wrote to the headmaster of Dartford Grammar School and asked for a place there. The headmaster replied positively. And so he started at the new school and there was an immediate transformation. He made friends, did well at work and was settled there.

What a contrast between the two schools. What a contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee stands by himself praying. He may well have been praying aloud as was the common Jewish custom. Such a prayer would provide a golden opportunity to offer some ethical advice to the unrighteous around him. His public remarks are an attack on others but clothed in self promotion. He announces to God that he despises the greedy, the dishonest, the adulterous and thanks God that he is not like these other men and this tax collector. He does not compare himself to what God expects. He compares himself, as he sees it, to the lesser men around him.

The written law only required fasting on the yearly day of atonement. But the Pharisee announces that he feasts on two days a week and that he tithes all that he possesses. Surely, all those listening to his self promotion would be impressed by such a high standard of righteousness.

What I am struck with in this story is the contrast between the main characters, the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee is self assured, confident, proud of his own image. He bolsters his own self image by comparing himself to others and boasting of his own righteousness. What of the despised tax collector standing at the back. He chooses to stand apart from other worshippers. He is so distraught over his sins that he beats his chest.

This is like the other case of people beating their chests at the end of the day just after Jesus died. If it requires such a distressing scene to cause that, then the tax collector is deeply distraught. Both men are standing in front of the great high altar on which a lamb without blemish has just been sacrificed for the sins of Israel. The tax collector looks at himself and cries for mercy "God have mercy on me a sinner that I am."

The mercy of God is absolute and unchanging. And it is not ours to decide who has it or who does not have it. It is a pure and total gift given equally to all. Sin means missing the mark and is a matter of personal responsibility. Jesus said he did not come for the righteous or the virtuous but for sinners and to give us life and life abundantly. Jesus emphasised the absolute centrality of inner motivation and intention more than outward behaviour.

The Pharisee was completely caught up in outward behaviour. Where do I stand between the self righteous Pharisee and the despised tax collector? How does my life run? I was very struck by these words from a spiritual teacher "I was a revolutionary when I was young and all my prayers were to God. "Lord give me the energy to change the world". As I approached middle age I realised that half my life had gone without my changing a single soul so I changed my prayer to "Lord give me grace to change all those who come into contact with me, just my family and friends and I shall be satisfied." Now that I am old and my days are numbered my one prayer is "Lord give me the grace to change myself" If I had practised this right from the start I should not have wasted my life.

God alone will tell me who I really am and God will do so only in the life long process of bringing my thoughts and longings into his presence without fear and deception. This is what the tax collector does. It was this man, I told you, not the other, who went home made righteous, acquitted of his sins.

A parable is a complex of words and images that invoke, invite and persuade our participation in that to which they refer. The content of the parable evokes feelings. The feelings maybe wide ranging or quite focused around one or two emotions. Feelings themselves are neither right nor wrong but are enormously helpful indicators of the state of our inner life. Can we stay with them as friendly nudges towards creative choices? Symbolic images of the Pharisee and the tax collector give us a way of thinking which brings us closer to actual experiences of the spiritual world and concepts, ideas or thoughts. The tax collector standing afar off, distraught and beating his chest cries out "O Lord have mercy upon me, sinner that I am". He learns to accept the gift of God's forgiveness while the Pharisee feels he has already earned it. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted". How is the Holy Spirit at work in this person's life? Again and again in his teaching Jesus presents this theme of the righteous who do not sense their need of God's grace and the sinners who yearn for it and receive it.

I want to end with a prayer,

May you who are strong
Go out into the world with gentleness
And you who feel weak
Go on your way with new strength
May you who are confident
Walk now with humility
And you who are anxious
Step out with more certainty
Live your life, knowing that you are
The sisters and brothers of Jesus
And the children of the most high God.

Revd Anne Hoad