

Sermon 27 October 2019 Trinity 19: Luke 18:9-14 (Pharisee & Tax Collector), 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

May our thoughts and deeds be always acceptable in your sight our Lord and redeemer, Amen

- Some translations call this the story of the Pharisee and the Publican – which at first glance is confusing to someone like me who has little knowledge of Ancient Rome – for them a publican was not someone who runs The Old White Horse but a public servant – ie a civil servant working for the Roman Empire, one of whose jobs was to collect taxes, hence the clearer translation for us nowadays of “Tax Collector”.
- We hear a lot about Pharisees and tax collectors in the gospels – groups whom Jesus frequently encounters and who are at opposite ends of the spectrum of the Jewish people in the general perception of holiness. They both obviously believe in God, because both have come to the Temple to pray. But they (at least on this day) had totally different attitudes towards God which is what Jesus is highlighting in this parable.

Are we Pharisee or Tax Collector? Let us turn to Christ for help

- Tax Collectors were despised by most of the population including the religious authorities because they worked for the Roman occupiers and also had a reputation for cheating people out of money by overcharging them..... so they were no saints.
- In strict terms of following the Jewish law and his knowledge of the Scriptures, the Pharisee was probably streets ahead of the tax collector and he knew it and probably despised the tax collector for not living up to his religious standards,
- but in his relationship with God the Pharisee just hadn't got it and that is what really mattered and matters in *our* lives today- it's not about how much we have studied, whether we have responsibility for leading groups or worship.... we are all sinners (it's inevitable because we are humans) and we all need forgiveness from God and we can only get that through being humble.
- – our job titles or positions of leadership mustn't blind us to this, which is what seems to be happening to the Pharisee, who seems either to be totally unaware that he is a sinner or worse still, puts himself publicly in a superior position to those he considers beneath him.

Are we Pharisee or Tax Collector? Let us turn to Christ for help

- Like the tax collector who is asking for help and forgiveness from God – that is, *engaging* with God, rather than the Pharisee who is just informing God of his superior position – it is *our* personal relationship with God, through his Son Jesus Christ that matters,
- a facing up to reality of the fact that in the messiness of real life we fall short of what God hopes from us but also that we need His help in the pain and brokenness we may be experiencing in our lives.
- It takes humility and courage to ask for help- like the tax collector approaching God
- rather than isolate ourselves and think we can manage on our own. – like the Pharisee who couldn't see he needed God's input

Are we Pharisee or Tax Collector? Let us turn to Christ for help

- We may have to overcome stigma, vulnerability or fear of ridicule to ask for and accept help but as Christians we need to try in every situation to trust in Christ being with us as he was with Paul as we heard in the reading from 2 Timothy : Paul said “the Lord stood by me and gave me strength”.
- If we turn to Christ and ask for his help Jesus *will* bring us healing and strength and guidance.
- So let us take this opportunity today to open ourselves to Christ and ask him to bring us healing and wholeness for something in particular that is worrying us or that we are sorry for, and to be anointed with the oil of healing blessed by the bishop of St Albans last Maundy Thursday and distributed to all parishes for just this situation.
- Our faith and trust in our living God of forgiveness and love means that when we say sorry to God , we are forgiven and can start with a clean slate as long as we try to change our behaviour – to repent. The tax collector was upset and knew he had done wrong and could not even face looking up towards God and beat his breast in a sign of sorrow. He was talking TO God – in a 2 way relationship – he would have felt God's forgiveness.
- The Pharisee on the other hand followed the letter of the law intently and believed his works deserved praise from God, but he had NO 2 way relationship with God- his prayers were all centred on himself rather than approaching God

Are we Pharisee or Tax Collector? Let us turn to Christ for help

- How could the Pharisee have formed his prayer in a way that would have brought him into contact with God , and been more humble?

Maybe something like this?

- Thank you for the blessings you have poured upon me....
- Help me share your love for each person with them.....
- Help me lead by example and not say that I am right and the “sinner” is wrong
- Grant me the right words to speak to build relationships.....
- Lord God open my eyes to those around me who struggle and rather than criticise, help me build them up and suggest ways to give them confidence
- Help me understand and have compassion for people rather than me keeping apart because they are different

Are we Pharisee or Tax Collector? Let us turn to Christ for help

When I was researching this sermon I read about an old prayer from the Jewish Prayer Book which ran: “Blessed art thou who hast not made me a Gentile.../ slave,..... /woman...., so the caricature of the Pharisee which Jesus used “I thank you God that I am not a thief etc” would have resonated with the Jews of his day

- As Christians aren’t we just as bad amongst ourselves?
- We may not actually pray to God “ Thank you God that I’m not a right wing evangelical who finds it hard to accept LGBT rights.....or an Anglo-catholic who doesn’t accept women priests or bishops” but if you’re honest, can you actually say you never criticise other Christian denominations and that believe you are right and they are wrong?
- In that way we are all the Pharisee that Jesus is criticising aren’t we? Which leads to 2 questions:
 1. Is there anything we can do about it?
 2. Do we really WANT to do anything about it?

The answer to question 1 is YES.

- Firstly we need to open our ears “Let those with ears hear” (parable of sower) –
- Remember this is a Parable – and Jesus told parables to give direction and encouragement to those who wanted to follow him but which so often turned the world’s values upside down and therefore posed huge challenges to listeners then and for us today, all of us who want to follow Christ more closely
- Christ used stories/pictures of everyday life that were accessible to all who heard him then–they might be a little harder for us to relate to- but there is always a hidden meaning open to those who wanted to look deeper and usually a twist in the tail as there is here:

Are we Pharisee or Tax Collector? Let us turn to Christ for help

- The answer to question 2 is for each of us to decide for ourselves:
- Do we WANT Christ to challenge us,
 - to break through our self-reliance and let him transform our lives ,
 - bring us fullness of life
 - hope in God’s eternal love ,
 - peace with ourselves and with others?
- Jesus is calling us to reflect on our self- seeking or self-reliant actions and be humble enough to recognise the damage they might do to others around us and to bring these to God for his healing love to transform us, so that gradually we grow in his all-embracing love towards humility, understanding , cooperation and gentleness as we let Christ work through us in the world to grow God’s Kingdom here on earth.
- Jesus gives us the choices and we have to struggle and decide whether to follow – to throw everything on God’s mercy.
- Jesus promises us peace and fulfilment of life if we take the challenge,
- Jesus didn’t promise it would be easy, but together with other Christians we can strengthen each other and build each other up through God’s eternal love he has for each one of us.

Are we Pharisee or Tax Collector? Let us turn to Christ for help

Amen

