



# *Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Sharmain James*



Sunday 23 October 2022

### READINGS

Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

## *The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector*

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector follows last week's gospel reading of the unjust judge and the persistent widow. These two parables are often interpreted side by side because of the apparently shared theme of prayer.

The passage that immediately follows today's parable is about the disciples not allowing the children to come to Jesus. This caused Jesus to rebuke them saying: - "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it". The story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector fits nicely within the general theme of dependence on God's graciousness – rather than relying on self. While Jesus directs the parable at the Pharisee – Luke seems to have a wider audience in mind, addressing anyone who is vulnerable to pride and self-righteousness as the Pharisee is in today's gospel reading.

Verse 9 introduces and gives us the context of the parable – stating that Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves and regarded themselves as righteous over others. Being Righteous – is an important theme in the gospel of Luke. Elizabeth and Zechariah were said to be righteous before God – they lived blamelessly according to all the commandments – and regulations of the Lord. (1:25) Simeon was righteous and devout. (2:25) Having witnessed the death of Jesus – the centurion declared – "certainly this man was righteous". (23:47). Joseph of Arimathea is described as a good and righteous man. (23:50) Luke offers his readers many examples of genuine righteousness. These individuals are righteous because they obey God's commandments and completely trust in God's mercy. To those who are self-righteous – I.O.W. – trusting only in themselves – Jesus declares "I tell you – there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous person who need no repentance. He also says: - "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.

Today's parable depicts two contrasting figures – a Pharisee and a tax collector – praying in the temple. For Luke the Temple is a special place of prayer where righteous people and early disciples went to pray. To see a Pharisee in the Temple praying was not unusual – but a tax collector praying in the Temple is indeed a bit odd and possibly shocking. Pharisees often prayed, went to the temple, placed themselves under the Law, were exemplars of right behaviour – so they certainly must be trusting God not themselves. So it would seem that the Pharisee's prayer thanking God that he is not like the rest of humanity was not all that unusual. He is the model of the pious man, both by what he did do (fasting and tithing); and by what he didn't do – acting like thieves, evil people, adulterers, and tax collectors. This Pharisee was apparently beyond reproach.

On the other side stands the tax collector. Tax collectors were considered traitors to their fellow Jews. They collected exorbitant levies for the Romans and for their own profits. Nevertheless – the tax collector demonstrates a surprising attitude of humility by standing far off and keeping his eyes lowered. Four aspects of the tax-collectors humility are briefly indicated by Luke: (1) he stood far off, (2) he kept his eyes lowered, (3) he beat his breast as a sign of repentance, and (4) he cries out for mercy. Unlike the Pharisee the tax collector gives at least some evidence of humility and remorse. He stands apart not because of his worry about defilement, rather he knows his unworthiness. Rather than suggest that he himself is righteous, the tax collector self-identifies with exactly what the Pharisee considered him to be: a sinner. He boasts of nothing before God but pleads for God's mercy. His prayer echoes the opening words of Psalm 51: - "Have mercy on me, O God.

Nothing more is said of the tax collector's prayer. It is complete as it stands, and nothing more needs to be said of his character. Jesus concludes that it is the tax collector and not the Pharisee who goes home justified, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Despite the man's sinfulness, he was made righteous by God. On the surface, it would seem here is another example of Jesus who favours the outcast, - another story where Jesus makes the unlikely the hero. This is a very simple parable. It feels silly to interpret it when its message is so obvious. The parable is a trap. There may be the temptation to identify with the tax collector and not the Pharisee. But as soon as you think, "That Pharisee, what a jerk!", and place all of your identification with the tax collector, you're the Pharisee. Thank you, O God, that I'm not like that Pharisee. It's a trap. The trap of this parable is that we are usually a bit of both Pharisee and tax collector as we move through our lives, whether we realize it or not. The trap of this parable is a contradiction – the moment we see ourselves as sinner or saint – we are casting judgement, and not in right relationship with God.

The way out of the trap? Keep the focus on God – not on ourselves. It isn't about the Pharisee or the tax collector, not really. It is about remembering that God is alive and at work in our lives, and to pray for guidance and grace to live as God would have us live and to never be concerned with how we measure up, but how we live in relationship with our brothers and sisters and all of God's creation. It isn't easy, and we will fail. That is why our confession and absolution is so important. Did you ever really notice the words of the confession? It isn't about rattling off a list of things we think we got wrong, is it? It is all about relationship. Almighty God we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We are truly sorry."

It is always about relationship – with God, and with one another. While we are busy trying to make things about us, Jesus is reminding us that it is God alone who justifies. God alone decides who is good enough for the Kingdom. In our reading from 2 Timothy Paul says: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness." At first glance his words sound a lot more like the Pharisee than the tax collector, but Paul speaks about his dependence on God. Paul is not boasting but he recognizes his dependence on God. "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength..." "The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom."

He knows where both his righteousness and his hope come from: They don't come from his own perfection; Nor do they come from self-rejection. His righteousness and his hope, his life and his life after death, are not about him at all. They are about God. So this morning I pray that this parable continue to work on us especially in the weeks to come reminding us that our wholeness isn't found in comparing ourselves to others but in our coming to awareness of our dependence on God's grace. Amen.