

Reflection for Pentecost 20 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”
Jesus’ words that end our gospel reading today.

To put it another way, it is a bit like the comparison between - Look at me aren’t I great! which some might describe as the cult of celebrity and the unsung hero who quietly goes about what they are doing without looking for praise, fame or glory.

In the parable, Jesus reflects on two prayers and two characters and deliberately does so in a way that provides a great sense of contrast, a sharpness and a challenge.

Firstly, we have the Pharisee, pictured as a pious man, living an honest and upright life, doing much that is good: a man who attempts to do more than the Jewish law of time required.

- Fasting twice a week—on Mondays and Thursdays—although the law required people to fast only once a year - on the Day of Atonement.
- Giving tithes of all his income and not just of the required parts.

But as he stands up in a prominent place to pray, he commends himself for his piety - his prayer is all about himself, despising his neighbour and suggesting to God that there is nothing he needs.

Then there is the tax collector, standing in a quiet and secluded corner of the temple courtyards, not even daring to lift up his eyes up towards heaven, still less his hands, as he prays to God. His prayer acknowledges that he is a sinner. This tax collector is all too aware of his unworthiness to approach God, all he does is simply offer a confession of his sinfulness and appealing to God’s grace, mercy and love.

As Jesus reflects on both characters in his parable his verdict is simple: the tax collector is the one who goes home justified, whose prayer is not only heard, but also accepted by God. The Pharisee’s prayer, by contrast, is not.

The parable is another example of one of the themes which we see coming across time and again in Luke’s gospel - God’s concern and love for those who are on the margins, on the edge of society regardless of how the rest of society may see them. To illustrate this let me give you three examples.

Firstly, the Christmas story.

When you look at Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, doing so in isolation from Matthew’s version, the striking thing is that the first people to visit “the holy family” at Bethlehem, in the humble surrounding of the stable, are not the rich and famous but a group of shepherds – considered to be on the edge of society at the time.

Secondly, the story of Zacchaeus.

As Jesus is passing through Jericho he has an encounter with Zacchaeus, a man who in monetary terms was well off, although that wealth had been illegally gained exploiting folk as he collected their taxes. The result was that, in social terms he was on the edge of society. Yet, despite the very audible complaints of those in Jericho, Jesus deliberately goes to visit him and as a direct result of that visit, Zacchaeus is not only reconciled to God but accepted back into wider community.

Thirdly, the words of Jesus from the cross

As Jesus hangs on the cross dying we have his conversation recorded with the two criminals who are crucified with him. One of the criminals, acknowledging his guilt and Jesus’ innocence, and as he does so placing himself at God’s mercy’s to which Jesus responds – “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

God's love - touching those on the edge or on the margins, the 'outcasts' of society, always ready to receive the unrighteous with arms open wide. (In our current turbulent economic situation, when many may feel on the edge, that is a message the church still has to offer both in word and deed.) By contrast, God's ears are closed to those whose pride in their own religious practices or good works makes them feel self-sufficient, self-confident.

St Paul puts it like this in Romans 5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

This parable challenges us on several levels.

Are we, both as individuals and as a church community following the example of Jesus in reaching out to those on the edge of society? Are we providing a place and a community that is open and welcoming to all in both word and deed?

We also need to use the parable a bit like a mirror. Which of the two characters in the parable do we see looking back at ourselves as we look into the mirror?

Has our faith and worship become like the Pharisee in the parable - a badge we want everybody to see? But what do they see? Does the image point towards God or towards ourselves?

Similarly, where does our confidence come from - ourselves, our own abilities and good deeds or God's love, his grace, his touch, the saving power of the cross? It should be the latter. That is what we see in the tax collector - an acknowledgment of his failings and unworthiness yet a willingness to look towards God for love mercy and the way forward.

As our thoughts draw towards a close let's turn to our epistle reading, as St Paul reflects back over his life, in the final part of his second letter to Timothy. He says this.

I have fought the good fight. Here, Paul in no way indicates that his effort has been good, but rather that the task, namely his ministry, is a noble one and he has been faithful.

I have finished the race. He is indicating that his life, and more particularly his ministry, is almost over.

I have kept the faith. He has kept his trust in God who called him (remember where he started - as one setting out to destroy the early church, yet God's love and grace touching him on the road to Damascus)

Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness. His confidence even now is not his own efforts but in God. It is confidence that extends to all who place their hand in God's hand.

His final charge to Timothy is to remember that God stood at Paul's side despite all the challenges he faced and gave him the strength he needed so that, through his ministry, the message of the gospel might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it. This is not about self, with a focus on St Paul, but on God's love, grace and Spirit working through him.

Timothy is encouraged to follow the same path.

To summarise, we are called to acknowledge our weakness and failings; to place our hand in God's hand and walk with him. An offer that is open to all.