

Pentecost 25 – 10.00am Parish Service – 27<sup>th</sup> October 2013

Reading: Luke 18: 9-14 'The Pharisee and the Tax Collector'.

Text: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable." Luke 18:1

### Introduction

I love Luke's editorial or introduction to this parable – blunt, to the point, no messing around. An absolute direct message to those who thought they were pretty good and were 'tight with God' and they were doing everything correctly in their faith. The smug, self-satisfied individuals that thought they were better than others. That is who this parable is for, to give them a bit of a shock that just maybe they weren't as close to God as they thought. Quite possibly this is a parable for ourselves today when we become complacent and self-righteous, looking down on others who have differences in belief, interpretation of the Scriptures or whose lifestyle is different to ours and what we think is right!

### The Parable

The Pharisees are often the 'baddies' in Jesus' parables but to be fair, they were pretty good people. They did everything right. They followed the law of God to a 't'. We struggle with the daunting task of keeping the Ten Commandments. The Pharisees went way beyond that. They dug through the Hebrew Scriptures and found a whopping 613 commandments and they attempted to keep every one of them! They went all out to do everything that they felt God asked them to do. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures say not to take God's name in vain. Hence the Pharisees decided it was better never to say God's name lest you use it in the wrong context and break the commandment. This is an example of how they followed 'the letter of the religious law' to show what a good person they were. So what's the problem with the Pharisees that Jesus takes exception to? Here's the problem with the Pharisees. They were good people and knew it. They followed the rules and wanted everyone else to see how well they did. Yet the Pharisees missed the point. For them, the Pharisees thought the whole thing was about following the rules, but the point of the commandments is not the commandments themselves.

The point is kindness, mercy, compassion, love and forgiveness. The commandments are there to teach us about our relationships with others and our God, not simply to live our lives by the 'letter of the law'.

The point is living as God's holy people; merciful, gracious and loving. The problem is that the Pharisees really didn't see beyond themselves and simply thought that as individuals they were pretty good because they kept the commandments. This is the legalism that Jesus was against. Hence we read in the parable:

"The Pharisee stood up in the temple and prayed about himself:

'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers, - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

Vss 11/12

Note that the Pharisee prayed about himself – four times 'I' is used in these two verses. There is no thought of others except as a 'put down'.

Now there is the 'tax collector' – ancient Palestinian tax collectors were not like our Taxation Office. Rather they were people enforcing a taxation system by their overlords, the Romans, paying them the tax required and making a profit by charging above what was necessary. In a sense they were a sub-contractor, collecting the tax

required by the Empire and making sure there was a good margin in it for themselves. Hence they were hated by the locals, often seen as a traitor within their own community. Frequently they were foreigners which made it easier to be a reject of that community in which they collected taxes for their masters.

It is with this background that we need to read the parable and what Jesus says about him.

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’” Vs 13

In a sense the tax collector prays with the help of a portion of Psalm 51:1 which reads:  
“Have mercy on me O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.”

In throwing himself on the mercy of God the tax collector ‘went home justified’. That is, his sins were forgiven and he was credited with righteousness, not his own but that which comes from God.

Pretty strong stuff.

### Reflection

The Iona community in Scotland has a gift for articulating through tune and lyrics many of the joys and challenges of discipleship in a complex world. In the song “Sing Hey for the Carpenter” which we sang after the Children’s Talk today, we were invited by Jesus to “Come with me, come walk/share/sit and leave the Pharisees rules...” This song speaks of the liberation and celebration through leaving behind you the false things that were once a source of meaning and comfort. Rather unsettling, like this parable, that changes the ground rules of life. The final line of the chorus says:

“Sing hey for the people who leave their regrets!”

Here we have the liberation of knowing that God is loving and merciful. We can leave the past behind and get on with life itself instead of wallowing in the past or grieving past events. There is a new freedom and the parable shares that the tax collector finds this.

### Conclusion

Bruce Prewer often has a lovely way of summarising passages in his own words. In his book ‘Beyond Words – reflections on the Gospel of Luke’ he writes:

“One man went to pray, went to pray at temple,  
One man and his righteousness went to bray at temple.

Another went to pray, went to pray at temple,  
One man and his empty soul went to pray at temple.

One man stood up front, right up near the altar,  
One man full of righteousness prayed without falter.

The other prayed way back, far from any altar,  
One man and his empty soul at the end of halter.

One man went home light, free from every blunder,  
One man had space for grace went home filled with wonder.” (Page 48)

May we think carefully and prayerfully upon this parable of Christ for us today. Amen