

Sermon given by The Revd. Prof. Paul Foster  
St.Cuthbert's Episcopal Church Colinton on 23rd October 2016

Luke 18:9-14 The Pharisee and the Tax-Collector  
2 Timothy 4:6-18 I have fought the Good Fight

Today's gospel reading relates a parable of Jesus, which is usually given the title 'the Pharisee and the tax-collector'. Although that title is accurate, it does not score high marks for creativity. In this parable the focus is on the theme of true humility and the mercy of God. It is not the person with unabashed self-confidence in his religious practices who is said find favour in the sight of God, but rather the tax-collector – a person who made the lives of others intolerable through exploitation and extortion.

Pomposity is never an attractive character trait. It is even more repugnant when exhibited by religious people. The characters in Luke's parables are often more like caricatures, with overblown features, somewhat like Trollope's Mr Slope or Dickens' Reverend Stiggins. In reality, Pharisees were perhaps little like their characterization in the gospels in general, or in this parable in particular. They were members of a movement with a reforming agenda, which advocated personal piety, instead of just a loose attachment to the institutional religion. On that score I am in full agreement with them. However, the trouble is that such zeal can often lead to intolerance or an over-blown self-confidence.

Today's parable reminds me of an interview I had during the process of exploring the possibility of ordination. An archdeacon sat across the table from me with a bibulous red nose and mutton-chop sideburns. He put the following proposition to me. 'The church fathers' he said 'used to say one must let one's head sink into one's heart to truly apprehend the divine. What do you think they meant?' As no doubt he intended, I was caught off-guard and fumbled for an answer. I blurted out some nonsense about spirituality not being purely intellectual, instead that head and heart must operate together to truly appreciate divine love. He looked at me, stroked his whiskers, and let out a long 'ummm'. He paused, then he passed judgment on my answer. 'That is part of it', he said, 'but I can see you have not reached the same level of spirituality as some of us.' I could not believe what I had heard, were we meant to be having some alpha-cleric competition where we asserted 'my spirituality is bigger than yours.' My respect for my interviewer quickly evaporated. I was immediately thankful that I was not like my interviewer. But there's the problem isn't it, I exhibited the exact tendency which today's parable is criticizing. The very moment I made that judgment I was not simply as pompous as my venerable interviewer, I was actually being more self-conceited, even if I did not recognize it at the time.

Yet one may legitimately ask whether we as Christians ever exhibit a degree of confidence in a way that is appropriate? Well our epistle reading today portrays a very confident Paul. He declares that he has run the race, he has kept the faith, he has a crown of life awaiting him. Is this mere pomposity? I think not, and it is not just because it is in the bible that I feel forced to say that. The circumstances Paul finds himself in are a bit of a 'game-changer'. Death looms large on his horizon. He says the time of his departure has come, he is about to be poured out as a drink offering. Paradoxically, if Christian boasting is ever appropriate I would suggest it is appropriate when there is apparently nothing to boast in. The epistle presents Paul as being alone in Rome, about to face the martyr's death. He states that 'at my first defense no one supported me, all deserted me', but then prays 'may it not be counted against them'. Yet despite the bleakness of the apparent circumstances, Paul appears remarkably upbeat. His confidence is not in himself but in the Lord. Despite being

deserted, he declares ‘the Lord stood with me, he strengthened me ... he will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.’ This is not the kind of pompous self-confidence that is depicted in our parable, rather it is a blessed assurance, it is a solid joy, it is faith based on a firm foundation. Throughout the history of the Church such inspirational sentiments of confidence have been articulated as believers denied the power of those who attempted to silence the good news by killing its messengers. I was in Oxford on Thursday and Friday a couple of weeks ago, and like many visitors to that city I made my regular pilgrimage to Blackwells bookshop. On leaving, I walked along Broad Street, a very unobtrusive little stone cross is embedded in the road and it is only with some hunting around that one finds the explanatory plaque on a somewhat distant wall. The cross marks the place where two of the early English reformers were burnt at the stake for adherence to their faith. As the faggots were being lit, Latimer the bishop of Worcester, spoke confidently to his fellow victim Nicholas Ridley, bishop of Rochester, with the following timeless words, ‘Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.’ Mere bravado, over-confidence, pomposity – I think not. Extreme circumstances allow for moments of extreme confidence, not in oneself, but in the God who comforts his people and negates the power of death.

Yet such moments are rare. The default Christian attitude should not be one of superiority, but a desire to exhibit the mercy of God, simply because we all have received his mercy. A minister in a Methodist church in Australia told me that in the impetuosity of youth in his first church he had a banner made up which he thought would announce to all the inhabitant of the small country town that the church was for all the people. The congregation arrived on Sunday morning, to find a yellow banner with black letters that announced, ‘this church is for sinners’. The anger levels rose, they declared that the sign should be taken down, they came to church to be better than other people, they were not sinners, they weren’t in the pub night after night. The young minister refused to give way. But a strange thing happened, while many in the congregation would not speak to him, rough shearers and long-term alcoholics stopped him in the street. They didn’t know what to call him, padre, father, or even the ubiquitous Aussie greeting ‘mate’. And while not many of them entered the doors of the church (perhaps they realized what the people were like) they spoke openly about their dysfunctional lives and their heartfelt desire to be better people, to be truly human, to leave destructive behaviours behind.

Today’s parable presents two characters. Its jarring message is that only one returns home justified before God, and it is not the person who is the regular Temple attendee. So I am called to examine myself, will I go home today justified before God? Maybe I won’t be quite as crass as the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not like other people, but will I be honest enough to admit with the tax-collector that I need God’s mercy precisely because I am like other people? If there is any room for confidence, then it is not in one’s own achievements, but in the achievements of another. Together we look at a wooden table in our midst, and we are reminded of a wooden cross. We see broken bread and poured out wine, and we glimpse him who stood alongside the broken. We have come today, not because of the good things we have done, but because we realize we are too often less than what we should be. We come because we need to be re-made and re-formed in Christ image. So together we pray, create in us clean hearts O Lord, and renew a right spirit within us. Amen