

## **Proper 25 (Last Sunday after Trinity)**

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey<sup>1</sup> on Sunday 23 October 2022

*Readings: 2 Timothy 4 vv 6-8 & 16-18 and Luke 18 vv 9-14*

The Pharisee represents those who think themselves to be well regarded by God and humanity, and look with contempt on their neighbour. The tax collector has sinned, but he recognises it and humbly asks God for forgiveness. The tax collector doesn't think of saving himself on his own merits, but knows that he must seek the mercy of God. The preference of Jesus between these two is clear, as the last line of the parable indicates. The tax collector returns to his house justified, that is, forgiven and reconciled with God; the Pharisee returns home just as he left it - preserving his sense of righteousness, but cutting himself off from God's loving mercy.

To us, the Pharisees are the villains, but they were, in many ways, heroes in the Holy Land two thousand years ago. Pharisees took the Bible with the greatest possible seriousness and were focussed on doing God's will in every area of their lives. If anyone was going to be saved, the Pharisees were at the front of the queue.

The tax collectors, on the other hand, were considered traitors to their people and their nation. They were greedy men who had bid for the contract offered by the Romans to extract the tax and tribute from their fellow countrymen. If they delivered what the Romans demanded, the Romans weren't bothered if the tax collectors made a hefty cut for themselves. The tax collectors also acted as money lenders, often lending to their countrymen at significant interest rates. Extortioners and loan sharks: a fearful combination. No wonder they were hated – and why Jesus used one of these men to make the point of this parable.

Jesus frequently turns expectations upside down. There is no doubt about the Pharisee's dedication and sincerity. But he gets things seriously wrong, because his main concern is to compare himself (favourably, of course) with others before God, who doesn't need us to tell him what we are like. God knows us, without us saying a word. The Pharisee's problem is that he cannot imagine that he might have fallen short of what God requires of him. And that's why the Pharisees were open to the charge of hypocrisy.

The tax collector, on the other hand, is all too well aware of his sins and the mess his life is in, because of his greed and exploitation of others. In his concern that God might have mercy on him, he gives no thought for what others might think of him; he blots that out. And Jesus applauds his single-minded search for forgiveness and redemption.

Very few of us are always in the place of the Pharisee or always in the place of the tax collector; that is, we are neither righteous in everything nor sinners in everything. The worst thing would be to act like the tax collector in our daily lives and like the Pharisee in church. The tax collectors were sinners, men without scruple, who put money and business above everything else. The Pharisees, on the contrary, were very austere and attentive to the law in their daily lives. We would certainly be open to the charge of hypocrisy if we kept moral behaviour to Sundays.

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<sup>1</sup> And also at the Town Church

If we must resign ourselves to sharing the characteristics of both, then let us be the opposite of what I have just described: like Pharisees in daily life and like tax collectors in church! Like the Pharisee, we must try in daily life to follow God's commandments and pay what we owe, both financially and in terms of being good citizens. Like the tax collector, we must recognize that the little that we have done is entirely God's own gift, and plead, for ourselves and for all, God's mercy and rejoice in his graciousness.

At first sight, it looks as if Paul has fallen into the trap. He writes to Timothy that 'there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me.' Has Paul returned to his Pharisee roots? We need not fear. Paul knows that his righteous standing before God depends not on his own good deeds or his obedience to God's law, but depends solely on God's generosity and on what Jesus has won for us by his death on the cross, 'a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world' (to quote Cranmer's words of the Prayer Book).

Paul knows full well that God has no time for 'those who are confident in their own righteousness and look down on everybody else'. It is a temptation for Christians, and indeed church communities, to fall into that trap, and make unwise judgements about others. No wonder that Christians are sometimes accused of hypocrisy.

However, by the grace of God, we can put our achievements into perspective. Although Paul is matter-of-fact in his statement of what has been achieved through his ministry at various points in his letters, Paul does *not* boast about the value of his own achievements in achieving salvation – the temptation into which the Pharisee in the parable has fallen. Paul gives the glory to God: he knows that everything he had done, for good or for ill, counts for nothing when set alongside the infinite mercy of God. And so should we – especially when we find ourselves open mouthed in amazement that God loves and accepts us and works in and through us, sinners that we are.