

Pharisee or Tax-collector?

Jeremiah 14:7-9, 19-22, Luke 18:9-14

27 October 2019

The other day I came across a religious broadcasting channel on the TV, where a tele-evangelist was giving a talk to a live audience. I suddenly pricked up my ears when I heard her saying, "I thank God every day that I am not like..." aha! I thought she was talking about the Pharisee and the Tax-collector. But no, she completed the sentence with, 'that I am not like my former self'. Then she went on to elaborate on what a dreadful person she used to be, and how pleased she was that no one in the audience knew her then. She acknowledged that she still had a long way to go, but all the same, with God's help she was now much, much better than she used to be.

In the light of our Gospel reading for today I am not sure what to think of her declaration. It was not quite what the Pharisee said, but it sounded suspiciously like it. Is it right - I wondered - to acknowledge our achievements in this way? We are so used to castigating the Pharisee in Jesus' parable for being self-righteous and pleased with his own goodness that we might think everybody, who recounts and appreciates the good things and achievements in their lives, must be like the Pharisee. And we are conditioned to reject this kind of behaviour. We are influenced by the Gospel writer's own framing of Jesus' original parable. What else could we think, when the story is introduced with the words, '*the parable was aimed at those who were sure of their own goodness and looked down on everyone else.*' And it concludes with '*everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*'.

There it is. Readily interpreted for us, all neatly wrapped up with a pretty ribbon tied around it. If you are not sure of your own goodness and don't look down on others – this parable is not for you. But if you are, you are condemned; unless you humble yourself, you cannot expect to be accepted by God. The Pharisee has had it, there is no hope for him. One preacher even says the Pharisee goes home unheard by God, whereas the tax-collector is the good guy, for he pleads for mercy, so he is justified and accepted by God.

There are several problems with this approach. One is that it is too obvious and Jesus was never known for stating the obvious.

His parables always had a sting in the tale, there was always a surprising and unexpected outcome, if there was an outcome at all. More often than not Jesus left the ending open and it was up to his audience to work out the meaning. So the framing of the parable by Luke closes down the possibility of any other interpretation. The warning here for us may be that accepting any proposition without thinking it through for ourselves, regardless of how much authority lays behind it – could damage our health. Our spiritual health, that is. Jesus' way of teaching points in a different direction.

The second problem follows from the first. If we accept the obvious meaning of this parable, we will judge the Pharisee bad and the tax-collector good. In which case, we are doing the same thing the Pharisee does: judging others on superficial evidence, not knowing their inner state of mind, their struggles, their detailed circumstances. We know we can all be guilty of this: judging without understanding. Sometimes, the mere appearance of people, or a word or two from them is enough for us to make up our minds against them and to decide they are not 'our kind of people'. The danger with judging like this, as Mother Teresa saw, was that, 'if you judge people, you have no time to love them'. Of course, when we judge people, sometimes we may be right, just as the Pharisee was right in seeing the difference between himself and the tax-collector. Generally speaking, tax-collectors were not nice people, they were collaborators with the Roman authorities, they got rich by doing their job in a dishonest manner and consequently they were disliked and avoided by most people.

But coming to the Temple to pray, these two people had more in common, than meets the eye. They are there, because they both believe in God, whether consciously or unconsciously they are aware of the spiritual aspect of their lives. They both appreciate and value the Temple, which gives them the opportunity to commune with God alongside other devout believers; they regard it as a place where there is room for both of them, even though their everyday lives may be miles apart. And they are both praying in the same traditional hope that their prayers would be heard. Just as it was heard in the time of their ancestors, who relied on the covenant faithfulness of God, as we read in our OT passage. Their prayers offer thanksgiving and confession pleading for mercy; both valid forms of prayer, we use them both in our regular worship. It's usual to point out though, that the tax-collector's prayer is the right kind of

prayer, because he acknowledges his utter dependence *on* God, whereas the Pharisee's words display self-righteousness, because he mentions all the good things he has been able to do *for* God.

But, wait a minute! Come to think of it, we do that sometimes in our prayers too, don't we? We give thanks for all the good things that are going on in our church, for example; for the service so many people render to make our church and our church community welcoming, a place where God's name is honoured and the way of Christ is followed. And at the same time, - though we may not actually say so. - we too feel slightly pleased that we are not like other churches. Does that make us self-righteous, like the Pharisee? Well, in defence of the Pharisee perhaps we should notice the opening words of his prayer, "I thank you God.." Surely, thanking God for something must mean to acknowledge it as a gift; not something to have achieved in one's own strength. So the Pharisee's prayer also shows a kind of dependence, and hopefully, so do our thanksgiving prayers.

There is another thing that is also true for both Pharisee and tax-collector, and maybe for us too: they are both talking about themselves in their prayers; overestimating or underestimating *themselves*. In this way they are drawing us into thinking about them and their different attitudes. Could it be that this whole parable is not about either a Pharisee or a taxcollector, that they are only there to show us that there is a bit of both of them in us too? To answer that question we have to look at Jesus' concluding sentence about the taxcollector a bit more carefully (and here I am using the wording of the NRSV for its more accurate translation): "*I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other*". The meaning of this conclusion depends on the Greek word '*para*', which can mean '*rather than*', but it can also mean '*alongside*' or '*next to*'. Presumably, because of Luke's framing comments, the translators and interpreters of the parable opted for the understanding that pitches the two characters against each other. And that left us with a narrow, limited view of God's grace, which operates in a predictable way and only under certain conditions.

However, using the alternative meaning of the Greek original, would make this sentence read like this: 'I tell you, this man went down to his home justified *alongside (just as much as)* the other'. Now, that is a challenging thought! For it implies that, whether we like it or not, God's grace cannot be limited, as the traditional

understanding of the parable does. That the good deeds of the Pharisee for and on behalf of the community are not ignored and are not cancelled by his self-satisfaction. Neither is the repentance of the tax-collector wipes out the reality of his misdeeds, which, for all we know, he might carry on doing after his tearful moment of regret.

It also implies that within God's impossible generosity there is room for all of us: those who are over-active in their religious life (and know it) and those who feel inferior for their lack of understanding (and keep reminding themselves and others of it). It is good news, not just for us inside the church, which we might be pleased about, but for everyone outside it as well, which we might find more difficult to swallow. Yet, we are all in this together. We are all in need of prayer to connect with our amazingly generous God, but we are also in need of connecting with each other on a more equal footing, not simply measuring ourselves against each other: looking up to certain people and feeling inadequate, like the tax-collector, or looking down on others and feeling superior, like the Pharisee.

Could it be that, in the light of Jesus' other teachings about the limitless and unfathomable mercy of God, this parable is also first and foremost about God? The God, of all-embracing care, who makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust, who has many, many different mansions in the divine home, and who, in Jesus Christ deems the whole human race worthy of love and sacrifice. By all means, let us recount our regrets in our prayers, but mainly, let us praise God and give thanks for the kind of God we have come to know in Jesus Christ.

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