

Year C Proper 30 23 Oct 2022

Thank goodness I am not like that tax collector over there, says the Pharisee. And under our breath we say thank goodness I am not like that Pharisee, boasting about his piety and his generosity. I may fall short in all sorts of ways, but at least I'm more self-aware than him.

Maybe we are justified in thinking we are more self-aware than the Pharisee, but it doesn't of course stop us falling straight into the trap that Jesus sets in this parable. Because, just like the Pharisee, we don't like to admit that we are sinners. We don't even like to say the word sin or sinner – in the traditional form of the Lord's Prayer we use the word trespasses, or, if you are in the Church of Scotland, debts. And try talking about sin outside a Church context these days and see where that gets you.

Almost the only time we all use the word sin in a service is in the Confession when we confess that we have sinned in thought word and deed.

It's fair to say that many Christians dislike the word, not least because they associate it with shame, but also because it can be so easily manipulated. Your sin is unacceptable, but mine somehow gets a free pass because of course my heart is in the right place, and it isn't bad enough really to be called a sin.

We are deluding ourselves if we think like that. We may all be made in the image of God, but we are also all broken people. And when we confess to being sinners, first of all we are admitting the truth we are a mess, even if we are a beautiful mess, loved by, and precious to, God. We are also acknowledging that we are totally dependent on God's grace.

Which is perhaps precisely why Jesus doesn't shy away from using the 's' word in this parable. We need to name our core sinfulness, not least because it is only when we confess it honestly that we are cleansed, healed, and justified.

It is perhaps surprising that the tax collector makes his confession publicly in the temple rather than in his local synagogue, it would be rather like going to St Mary's Cathedral to do so in the middle of main service of Eucharist. How well would that go down, do you think? Do you think it would be welcomed? Are our churches safe places to us to tell truths that could make us incredibly vulnerable? Or are they better suited to the sort of pious progress report given by the Pharisee? Is church the place where we go to show off our faith and hope no-one looks too closely behind the facade?

Perhaps we should be thankful that the tax collector doesn't specify his particular sins, but actually he makes himself much more vulnerable by naming the brokenness at the very core of his being. When I was younger, the focus in terms of sin was all about breaking the 10 commandments.

Don't get me wrong, I am not encouraging anyone to break the 10 Commandments, although I suspect we have all broken at least one of them on more than one occasion. But I think that's missing the point. God cannot love us more than he does even if we never break a single one of God's laws throughout our entire lives, and he cannot love us any less however many times we fall short.

God can cope with my sinfulness and your sinfulness. That's not the issue – the issue is what sin does to us. Sin can slowly destroy us because sin covers anything and everything that separates us from God. It's our refusal to become fully human, it's anything that stops us opening up our hearts to God, it's apathy, it's the opposite of flourishing, it's the opposite of abundance.

The tax collector got that totally, in contrast to the Pharisee. He got that on his own, he was lost, but as we know we are lost if we stand alone. But we don't need to be alone, because God is always near us. Accepting that nearness is the only thing that can help us and the only thing that can give us hope

I want to say a few words about the Pharisees. They get a terrible press in the Gospels, and I think generally unfairly. After all, Paul felt able to boast about being a Pharisee, at the same time as realising that had he stayed a Pharisee he would have missed out on the real deal of being in relationship with Jesus.

The thing is that the Pharisees' intentions were good. Unlike the priests they lived in their community and believed that by visibly obeying the laws laid down in the Hebrew Bible they could encourage Israel to restore its relationship with God.

But where they went wrong was in focusing on their outer boundaries, in other words who was in and who was out, based on their own definitions of purity and piety. They were in effect overzealous in striving for holiness. Of course, that also meant they could conveniently avoid looking at their own inner brokenness. But that's true of many people today, perhaps even most, which is why I think the Pharisee in this parable should be thought of as representative of a wider group than just his own sect.

Sadly, that's what a lot of modern-day Christians do too. We set up litmus tests for who's in and who's out, the tests varying between different denominations – the very opposite of Jesus' inclusiveness and hospitality. Even too much focus on the outward form of our worship can hinder us developing that inner relationship with God in our souls.

As one commentator puts it, 'It is possible to do all manner of impressive religious things, and still walk away unjustified. It is possible to allow our piety itself to deaden us to God's Spirit. It is possible to pray without touching anything within us that matters. It is possible to practice an outwardly beautiful Christianity that is ashen, lifeless, and pointless in the eyes of Christ.'

Isn't that the point that Jesus is making in this parable? Yes, the Pharisee was a good person, who did all the right things, indeed went over and beyond what he needed to do. Yet, effectively, his prayer was to himself about himself, all about his own efforts, not about God's grace. The problem was not his righteousness, but his self-righteousness. All that was left for God to do for him was to agree with him!! Where was the humility in that?

Religious self-righteousness takes all sorts of different forms, different churches draw different lines in the sand, but what it boils down to ultimately is that we think our line in the sand is good and more important than yours – and that's always assuming we don't think yours is plain wrong – and worse still more often than not that we think our judgement is better than God's as to who merits God's grace. But that's not what religion should ever be about. Religion is never the end, only the means to being in right relationship with God. And religious self-righteousness is a real barrier to that.

And of course, that self-righteousness, along with its companion arrogance, is not confined to religion, is it? We see it in every field of life, politics being an obvious example just now – and I am not just referring to Westminster politics. Far too many leaders in so many countries are rather full of themselves, in fact so full of themselves that they fail to realise that their self-absorption is way out of line with the norm. No wonder Enoch Powell said that all political lives end in failure!

Self-belief is one thing, and very little would be achieved without a healthy dose of self-belief. But it needs to be accompanied by a good dollop of self-awareness to stop it spilling over into arrogance. We need to acknowledge our limitations as well as our gifts. Of course, many people suffer from the opposite problem, only too aware of their limitations to the point of not recognising what their gifts are.

And it was the lack of self-awareness on the part of the Pharisee that was his undoing because he didn't know how to open himself up to receive God's grace and mercy. And it was the tax collector's self-awareness that freed him to be able to go home justified. But perhaps the parable isn't about the two men at all, but rather about God's never-changing preference for humility over arrogance and judgement

As ever, Jesus leaves lots of questions hanging in the air at the end of this parable. Did the Pharisee always pray prayers of self-satisfaction, or did he come to realise that his goodness wasn't down to him alone? Did the tax collector change his profession, let alone his ways, or did he return the next week and repeat the same prayer? In other words, we don't know if he did anything in the wake of his confession to justify God lavishing mercy on him.

That's precisely the point. We can't do anything to earn God's lavish mercy, it can only be received. We are unworthy and yet at the same time somehow not unworthy of God's grace and mercy.

And that's the point of confession. It's the opportunity to open our hands and receive God's abundant mercy in all our unworthiness.

In a moment let us stand or kneel as you prefer with our hands open to receive God's mercy as we say the Confession together.