

St Botolph's Church Worthing 23 October 2016

**Reverend Roger Walker
Luke 18: 9-14**

When we heard our Gospel Reading this morning I wonder which of the characters in the parable we identified with - the Pharisee or the tax collector? In looking at the parable, it is important to recognise that in Jesus' day both of the characters would have been unpopular with the ordinary people to whom he was preaching: the Pharisee because they tried to keep every small detail of the Jewish Old Testament law and strongly criticised those who did not, and the tax collector because he worked for the hated Roman occupying forces. Jesus has got the Pharisee off to a T with all his boasts about not being like other men. It would have produced the same type of hissy reaction as a pantomime villain does. But when Jesus praised the tax collector there would have been a stunned silence. The crowd would even be in favour of the Pharisee if the alternative was to praise someone who was viewed as a traitor to his nation. Jesus is using this shock tactic to emphasise that what is important is penitence and humility before God.

We have spoken before about the meaning of the words justifying - used in this parable - and righteousness which, although seemingly unconnected in English have the same root in the language of the Bible. Dikaio is the verb 'to justify' and dikaiosure is the noun 'righteousness'. They both mean 'to be straight with God without any barrier of sin in between'. We know that this is achieved for us by the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won for us on the cross by taking upon himself the punishment that our sins deserved.

The Pharisee thought that he could get straight with God by keeping the Old Testament law. Many people still have this view today, saying something like "what God wants is for us to live a Christian life. This is very true, but that is number two, not number one, in God's desires for us. Number one is to have faith in Jesus Christ as God's son. The Pharisee in our parable is in effect trying to do the second one of God's desires for us. But he is missing the huge number of times in the Old Testament where God calls on his people to be humble. The tax collector gets humility right: he gets penitence for his sins right. He cannot believe in Jesus Christ because he does not know him, but he is well on the way to Christian faith and life. Jesus can therefore say he went home justified - that is, straight with God. This is unlike the boastfulness of the Pharisee, which never got near his own sins.

So which of these two men are we - boastful Pharisee or humble, penitent tax collector? We will all opt for tax collector and we will say "yes, I'm humble, I'm penitent and I have the Christian faith that the tax collector did not have" This is true, this is what God wants but saying it can get us awfully close to "I am not like other men". What God is looking for is how this humility, penitence and faith is shown in our lives day by day. Humility means being willing to be alongside the poor and the suffering and seeking to ease their condition - penitence means changing the way we live, so that we walk not in sinful ways but in God's ways. It also means making amends where we can to those whom we have hurt by our sin. Faith means having a sincere belief in all that Jesus has done for us and using this faith to give us the trust in God that enables us to make our humility and penitence real.

That's where we want to be, but an honest look at our lives will show us that we are not there yet - that there is still a bit of the Pharisaical "I am not like other men" in us,

which hinders our aiming at humility - and our penitence is made imperfect by the sins we try to hide from God. What a futile thing to do when he sees all the secrets of our hearts, and by our reluctance to turn fully on to God's way also to make full amends for past hurt we have caused. And then there is our faith - we believe, but the odd doubt is there, which can injure the full trust we need to have in God for this world and for the next.

We are not Pharisees - I hope - but what can we do about being imperfect tax collectors? Three simple things: we can pray and we can reach out more fully and generously to others. That means loving our neighbours as ourselves - we are never going to achieve perfection in this life, for we remain fallen human beings. But as our lives progress we can - we should - edge closer to the perfection that God showed to us in Jesus Christ. So we ask ourselves today "Am I getting closer to God" and we can use the example of the humble, penitent tax collector to help us.

AMEN

Rev Roger Walker

23.10.16