

Last Sunday after Trinity, Proper 25, 23 October 2022

Ecclesiasticus 35.12-17; Ps 84.1-7; 2 Tim. 4.6-8, 16-18; Luke 18.9-18

Last Sunday churches throughout the world considered Jesus' call to pray always and not to lose heart. To underline the point Jesus told the parable of the Persistent Widow. How did you fare? Did you pray? Did you not lose heart? Today churches throughout the world are to consider Jesus' admonishment directed at those who trust in themselves as being righteous, while considering others with contempt. In order to make his point Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The parable is told by contrasting a Pharisee with a Tax Collector. I shall refrain from commenting in detail on the ongoing debate in the British Conservative Party on raising taxes or lowering taxes, except to say that the fiscal discipline of seeking to balance the books while encouraging growth seems wise.

The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector is directed at a certain group of people. It is directed at those, as we already heard, who trust themselves to be righteous and regard others with contempt. It is now almost two thousand years since Jesus told this parable. Then as now there will be those who regard themselves as being righteous, while regarding others with contempt. In some cases, it seems obvious who these people are... But let's not fall into a trap. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector invites us, each one of us, to do a little house-keeping by examining ourselves in a myriad of ways.

Do we hold others in contempt, while entertaining a notion of ourselves that we are more righteous than we in fact are. We are all prone to measure ourselves against other people. The Pharisee is thankful. He is thankful for an ordered life. He fasts. He gives a tenth of all he has. He does tithe. These are commendable ways of ordering his life.

Jesus' admonishment is two-pronged. It is first of all an admonishment not to trust in one's own righteousness. This is biblical and it undergirds Paul's message not to trust in one's own righteousness, but to trust in Jesus who has become our righteousness. The second admonishment is against those who hold others in contempt. What is contempt? How would you define it? Contempt is the feeling that a person or a thing

is worthless or beneath consideration. Let me push a little harder on behalf of the Pharisee. I want to suggest that not being an adulterer is a good thing and that to renounce adultery is the right thing. To resist adultery is to honour the vow a married person makes at their wedding promising to “forsake all others”. Again, I suggest that not being a rogue is a good thing that it is even the right thing. What’s a good definition for a rogue? A rogue is a dishonest or unprincipled person. Finally, I maintain that not being a thief is a good thing. (Unless you are Robin Hood!) That to share is good and to share abundantly even better.

Is it the lift the Pharisee gets from feeling superior that is his downfall as the conclusion Jesus draws at the end of the parable indicates. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” It is the inability to see that despite the laudable ordering of his life he remains wanting, that he is still a sinner. Whereas the tax collector knows he is a sinner. He doesn’t come with a list of what he is getting right, but rather he comes as someone who knows as he comes into the Temple into the presence of God that he is a sinner requiring God’s clemency.

Can you see the tension this parable evokes. Yes, we are sinners, but can’t we in good conscience inch a little closer to being right with God. Can we be a little better at living righteous lives, which means bringing our lives into a better relationship with God. The Pharisees downfall is his need to compare himself with others and on this occasion with a tax collector.

This parable is also a challenge as we are called to seek God’s righteousness. There is something here that should make us pause, especially since one of the calls of the Reformation was to consider the freedom of a Christian. It is that old divide between Grace and the Law, grace and works, and how they stand in some opposition to each other. How they relate to each other. Today I am breaking a lance for righteousness, for seeking to being righteous, whilst resisting the temptation of thinking of others with contempt, and while recognising that we remain sinners, those in need of repentance, in need of grace, in need of God’s saving love.

Today Clementine is going to be baptised in God's saving love through the sacrament of baptism. Our hope is in God. The name Clementine means gentle, mild and merciful. It has the same origin as the word clemency.

We will never attain it, but we are to seek and live it to the best of our ability. So be it.  
Amen.