

"The Pharisee and the Tax Collector"

Luke 18:9-14

October 27 2019

We know this story so well, don't we? - Jesus' parable, of a Pharisee and a tax collector "who went up to the temple to pray."

So what might we need to have in our minds as we take another look at this story – especially after the recent spate of challenging and unsettling stories with a purpose – these parables - that we've been listening to over the past weeks? So tax collectors under Roman occupation? Other descriptions? Crooks, traitors? collaborators? This one was Jewish but he worked for the Roman government. He'd have purchased a franchise, an area where he was entitled to collect taxes; he'd have been told by the Romans the exact amount he needed to pay *them* – and anything else he made over and above that

was his to pocket for himself. So what kind of reputation did tax collectors have? Well not surprisingly they were *despised* as turncoats, and traitors. So in the way he's constructed the parable Jesus has (absolutely) set us up! And then who does he send into the story but a Pharisee who was one of the most *respectable* people in Judaism of his time and here he is in the Temple alongside this tax collector - a mafia-style enforcer, a rotten apple if ever there was one - 'juxtaposed' alongside a veritable pillar of society. You couldn't have a greater contrast- and isn't it testimony to Jesus' amazing story-telling ability!

We are also probably familiar with the details. The Pharisee 'standing by himself' prays - or rather 'says': "*God, I thank you that I'm not like other people. I'm not a thief. I'm not a rogue. I'm not an adulterer. And I'm certainly not like this tax collector over here. I fast twice a week. I give away a tenth of my income...*" (yada, yada - so he prattles on...). In the authorized (King James)

version it says “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself...” (I wonder whether we’ve ever done that?)..because it’s actually more of a speech or diatribe than a prayer, isn’t it? You can imagine him droning on interminably in the same vein...! And then it’s the tax collector’s turn (and notice he won't even raise his eyes to look up to the heavens; he simply stares down at his sandals, beating his breast), and mutters "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

And then Jesus says these remarkable words, "I tell you it's this man (this detestable tax collector – like the dreaded Samaritan and the widow he'd used as reference points before) who went home justified rather than the other - *for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*"

Well that’s the story – and like all of Jesus' parables, it should probably carry a massive government health warning that would read something like:

"this will be extremely hazardous to all your previous opinions about how faith works..."

As we've been seeing, Jesus' parables are *designed* to shock and outrage the hearers and to show how God has stood almost all of our values on their heads in this upside down Kingdom of his.

So what *is* this parable about? Some of the best insights I've read are from a very playful American theologian I discovered when I was at a really low point in my life years ago when I was living in Philadelphia (& Dirk whom I've got to visit in Colorado over recent summers and whom some of you have met slipped me his copy of *Hunting the Divine Fox*..) The theologian's name is Robert Farrar Capon. He says the parable is not (as I'm sure probably we've understood it) all about the virtue of humility. The Pharisee's problem is not that he's showing off, it's that he really *sincerely* believes that his stack of good deeds is enough to save both the world and himself. And, moreover, he believes it

would be enough if only everyone else would do exactly what *he* does.

But what the Gospel says is that human goodness *isn't* good enough to pull this trick off. Human goodness *cannot* reconcile the world to God nor sort out its problems.Because basically, if the world *could* have been reconciled by merely acting on good advice from God, the problems would have been solved within ten minutes of Moses getting down to the bottom of the mountain with the commandments. Everyone would have read the tablets and said, "Oh, yes, of course – what a silly idea the golden calf was," and the problem would have been – as people say in these parts – “sorted”. The trouble with the commandments is that while they’re fine in themselves, while they underpin many western systems of justice and morality, no one has ever paid much personal attention to them – neither do they do apply them to ceasefires and no fly zones and human trafficking if you’ve noticed.

Laws, commandments, rules. treaties, accords (deals?) – they’re all exercises in morality, humility, spirituality and, very often *our* efforts at religion. They’re efforts at trying to do something that will get us right with God – or please society. The problem is (?) they simply don't work.

The Pharisee's mistake is not that he’s saying something that’s just proud or a little bit arrogant, but that what he is saying is *just plain wrong*. His own self-styled sense of goodness is irrelevant to the problem that he’s talking about. And anyway Jesus says, it’s the tax collector who simply looks down at his feet and says, "I'm no good," who goes home justified. Now, why is that?

The point is that this parable is really about death and resurrection life. It’s not about morality, or spirituality or one-upmanship or anything else. It’s about the fact that both the Pharisee and the tax collector, without God’s mercy are (in Capon’s words) “dead ducks...The Pharisee is (of course) a

very high- class kind of dead duck, but they are both sunk as far as being able to get their lives right with God is concerned.” The point about all of this is that the reconciliation God has in mind for them – where he’s able to bring them back into the relationship with himself that he’d always intended them to have - is utterly dependent on them totally rethinking their notions of what matters. This is all about Karl Barth’s ‘strange new world’ that the risen Jesus inaugurated.

As Robert Farrar Capon puts it: *“Jesus came to transform people and situations; he came to raise the dead. He didn’t come to teach the teachable; or to improve the improvable; he didn’t even come to reform the ‘reformable’ (?) because none of those things works”... “the tragedies go on. The lies go on. The nonsense goes on. The twaddle goes on (you can see why I love the way he writes).”All the things that are wrong with the world go on. They’re not amenable to talk. They are only amenable to action and, therefore, Jesus came to raise the dead*

-- meaning you and I in our utter deadness, the Pharisee in his deadness and the tax collector in his..."

If Jesus hasn't managed to do so already, it's this parable that really offends our sensibilities, isn't it? Surely if only other people were as nice and considerate and as wonderful as we are, the world would be a better place to live in

But God's clear message in Christ is: *"No. That's not going to work. It can't be done that way. It can't be done by people who think they're winners. It can only be done by people who are willing to admit they're losers and then who are willing to trust me to deliver them the gift of a new relationship."*

So we begin to see how the Pharisee (and indeed human nature, priding itself on its own goodness) gets it so wrong.

Indeed isn't this the challenge? - the 'offence' Paul calls it in Galatians, as does Peter in *his* letter, - of

the Christian Gospel and the Cross of Christ. We're afraid that God might have got it wrong in offering the gift of salvation to blatant, self-conscious sinners. But *this* is precisely where and how & with whom God loves to work. He loves working amongst the so-called losers of the world. (and if we're being honest, doesn't that include most of us?) The reason religious people don't like it so much, is that if *everybody* has the invitation to the party, then (& this is Farrar Capon again at his best) *"surely God has no taste. God is vulgar. God is indiscriminate. God is immoral. He's no great judge of character. He lets in sinners and forgives their sins. In fact he's forgiven them even when they don't realize it!"*

Even before people turn around and change their thinking - before they repent and allow themselves to be loved and changed, God has already welcomed the most obnoxious, undeserving and broken people you can think of. He lets **me** in. He lets **you**. All we have to do is believe it, not try and

earn it – as Rowan Williams defined a Christian – someone who looks into the face of Jesus and says “I trust you”.

As I finish (& I love this – I said Capon is playful) *“We have a God, according to Jesus' proclamation, who probably would be refused membership if there was a God union.”* (think about it – what kind of God is this?).

It's *we* who try and set the criteria for what God should look like – often just a bigger version of ourselves: a God who *has* to be a punisher; a God who *must* be a judge; a God who *has* to be respectable doing all the things that enforce morality as *we* see it according to our prejudices and sensibilities.

The problem is the One true God doesn't work according to that agenda

On the cross, in Jesus, he drops dead to the whole subject of sin and shuts up about the whole subject

of condemnation. (Remember what Jesus said on the cross?) "It's over - finished.." i.e. there's nothing you lot need to do or can do to add to this. So Paul can say at the beginning of the 8th Chapter of Romans: "There *is*, therefore, now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

The most important thing is that we believe - that we place our trust - in Jesus - and, as Archbishop John has been reminding us throughout the years of his episcopacy, Hebrews says: *fix* your eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith.

It's those that count themselves as dead who hear the beautiful voice of the Son of God and begin to live - they're the ones "who will go to their homes justified" - and changed - full of hope - and joy whatever the circumstances.... **Amen**