

An incomplete story.

It's one of the classic set-pieces in the whole gospel story. 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector'. And what follows is a stand-off between two groups of people who feature prominently in Luke's Gospel: Pharisees and the tax-collectors. And we all learn pretty fast how they square up in Jesus' eyes. The Pharisees of course are the baddies. They're the hypocrites who Jesus lambasted, calling them on one occasion 'whitewashed tombs'. What a polite, mellow fellow Jesus was! Then there are the tax-collectors and we know that Jesus seems to have rather liked them. He called one to be a disciple and he always seems to have been hanging out with them, downing shorts, playing pool and having bar-b-qs at their houses. And we imagine that they were kind of loveable rogues, rough diamonds with hearts of gold who looked after their Mums. The trouble is that these stereotypes are dangerously wrong. A Pharisee's passion for God and God's Law would have put all of us to shame, while as for tax-collectors – well, there was nothing loveable about them. Their reputation was of grubby little cheats, whose grabbing, devious ways colluded with the occupying power of Rome and brought misery to people already crushed by too many taxes to count.

Whatever the truth about these two groups of people, however, what we have here is surely a contrast between pride and humility. Whatever passion this Pharisee has for God, somewhere deep within his chest there beats a proud heart that is able to look down on other people with disgust, thanking God that he is not like them. Sadly, that seems to have been the effect of his rigorous attachment to God's law. And maybe we have a window into this man's soul when we notice the number of times the words 'I' and 'my' occur in his monologue: '*I* thank you God that *I* am not like other people... *I* fast twice a week, *I* give a tenth of all *my* income.' There speaks a man firmly wedded to his ego, with his catalogue of achievements. There speaks a man who does not raise his eyes to heaven because they're either fixed firmly on himself, or they're looking down on everybody else.

Contrast the tax collector. Like the Pharisee his eyes are not raised to heaven only for a rather different reason. He is so ashamed of himself, so full of remorse that he can only look down – not on others but on the ground. He only refers to himself once in his short cry: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

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He has no claims to make for himself, no inventory of successes. And of course we warm to this tax collector and his humility and, above all, his deep conviction of sin.

Or do we? Just look again at this figure, head cast down, beating his breast. Is this a good image? Should we see ourselves in this contrite tax collector? Is a strong awareness of sin something that should shape our lives? Well, let me start by saying 'yes'. There is no getting away from the fact that at the heart of the Christian Gospel lies a recognition of sin. Some don't like that. Doesn't the word 'sin' seem to have all sorts of judgemental associations that we need to get away from? Isn't it better to speak of 'mistakes' or 'shortcomings'? Well, whatever word we use we are talking here about something that is pervasive and which we dismiss at our peril – the sheer perversity, the ingrained selfishness that corrupts and distorts human nature. And if we're honest we see it in ourselves and we see it in others and we see it writ large in a world infected by poverty and violence and injustice. And I'm not sure that there is a better word for it than 'sin'. And one of the great things about sin is that it is a great equaliser, a great leveller, for no matter who we are and no matter where we are in the pecking order of status and respectability, we are all united but the fact that we are sinners. Paul says it in his letter to the Romans: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' And there is something quite subversive about this because I may have to look up to you because you are cleverer than me or because you have a better job than me or because you are richer than me, but I look you straight in the eye because deep down we are both just sinners before God.

There is a nice story about the 18th century Duchess of Buckingham, who took great exception to the great revivalist preacher George Whitfield who never hesitated to speak of people's sin. The duchess is reported to have said of Whitefield and his like:

"Their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect toward their superiors in that they are perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common lechers that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting and... at variance with high rank and good breeding."

Well, God bless the Duchess of Buckingham, but she has much to learn about the Gospel and about herself. One of the things that unites us all in a

common bond of humanity is our sinfulness and when at the beginning of the service we confess our sin there is no-one able to cross their fingers or exclude themselves. In fact I suspect that as we grow in the Christian life and as we grow in grace and in discipleship we become more and not less conscious of our sin. It's as if as we grow closer to the light it exposes our darkness ever more clearly and that is the real problem with the Pharisee in the temple. If he really was the holy Joe that he thinks he is then he would not be standing apart at all but would be standing alongside the tax collector with his eyes downcast, pleading for mercy.

So one cheer for the tax collector and his conviction of sin. There are, however problems with him. Let's just imagine for a moment that this tax collector was a woman rather than a man. Watch her with her eyes cast down, beating her breast, a picture of humility. Well, it may just be, not least in Jesus' day, that this woman has enough reasons already to hang her head. This woman, after all, lived under the crushing weight of a male-dominated, patriarchal society which kept her firmly in her place. And now on top of all that she must declare herself a sinner who dare not look up to heaven. Is that good? Well, there are a number of feminist theologians who think not, for they have taken issue with the common idea that might be endorsed by this story that the root of sin is pride – being puffed up and full of yourself – while godliness consists in a humble, subservient, self-effacing spirit. They argue that when you are oppressed and excluded then the worst thing – indeed the sinful thing – is to become like this tax-collector, for sin can be a failure to assert yourself and to develop a true sense of pride in who you are. And likewise there are theologians who work among the poor and destitute who would reject this tax-collector as the right image of salvation. Here after all are people crushed less by their own sins than the sins of others. What keeps them from the Kingdom is not primarily their guilt but their systematic dehumanisation. And the danger is that preoccupation with personal sin takes their eyes off the bigger structural sins that keep them locked firmly in their place.

As with so much about our faith, we are dealing here with deep and complex features of our human condition and we can so easily distort the Gospel. The writer Philip Yancey has written a classic book called 'What's so amazing about grace?' and he begins it with a true story about a prostitute who came to a minister and told him of how in desperation she had been renting out her little daughter to paedophiles. It was all she could do to support her drug

habit as she could earn more money that way than by prostitution. The minister had no idea what to say to her and eventually asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. “Church!” she cried. “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse!”

And that is the danger with this tax-collector. Where is grace here? As he stands there with his eyes cast down, does not his cry of ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’ just leave him feeling bad about himself? And is this not what the church has so often done?

Well, no parable can possibly express the whole gospel and this one isn’t trying to, but we do have to recognise that this is an incomplete story. This tax-collector, we are told, returned home acquitted of his sins. But if this tax-collector had met Jesus he would have gone home with much more than that. If this tax-collector had met Jesus he would have gone home not just acquitted but able to look up, able to look absolutely anyone in the eye, and not just because everyone else is a sinner too. He would go home with his head held high, with a level gaze, and indeed so would the Pharisee because in meeting Jesus they would meet grace and it’s grace that makes us stand tall.

A few weeks ago I mentioned an article by the British journalist Matthew Parris who, after visiting Malawi, wrote an article entitled, ‘As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God’. In it he describes the transforming effect of Christianity which so impresses him – and listen again to what he says: ‘Whenever we entered a territory worked by missionaries, we had to acknowledge that something changed in the faces of the people we passed and spoke to: something in their eyes, the way they approached you direct, man-to-man, without looking down or away.’ Those people Parris encountered in Malawi may have all sorts of reasons for looking down, looking away – as do all who are exploited or oppressed or who have failed. But the grace of God raises our heads. Grace lifts our eyes, makes us stand so that we can look the world – and anyone – in the eye.

It’s interesting, you know - our reading from 2 Timothy this morning includes some very moving words from Paul as he contemplates the end of his life and what he’s achieved. What is striking though is that Paul uses the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ word just as much as the Pharisee in the temple. Listen again: ‘As for *me* I am already being poured out... ‘*I* have fought the good fight, *I* have finished the race, *I* have kept the faith. And now there awaits *me* the garland of

righteousness...’ Is Paul like the Pharisee here, proud and puffed up? No. But neither is he like the tax-collector. Paul knows all about sin. He knows all about sin’s purchase on his life. But Paul knows the grace that has saved and redeemed him. Paul knows the love that has given him a right self-confidence and a level gaze. He knows the full story. Amen.