

Head bowed, eyes raised.

Most of you, I'm sure, will know that our church here belongs to the Church of Scotland, and the Church of Scotland is facing a period of considerable change and reorganisation at the moment as it wrestles with serious decline. One debate that the Church is engaged in concerns what we believe. The denomination states, as you would expect, that the Holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament are its supreme rule of faith and life – in other words we recognise the authority of the Bible for what we believe. But as well as the Bible we have what is called a 'subordinate standard' and this is a document that is considered to be authoritative for the Church, expressing the faith that we all sign up to, but recognising that this document does not have the weight and authority of the Bible. This subordinate standard is a 17th century document, hammered out in the context of the English Civil War, called the Westminster Confession of Faith. And as you can imagine, there are features of a document written 270 years ago that some people feel need revising and updating and that do not represent what most Christians today believe, and so the church is considering replacing the Westminster Confession as its subordinate standard, and we are not quite sure at the moment where that decision will go.

One thing that the Westminster Confession of Faith is strong on is sin. It wastes little time in getting to what it sees as the heart of our faith, namely that we are lost sinners, subject to the wrath of God, and in desperate need of the salvation that can only come as a gift from Christ. So, according to the Confession – and I quote – 'we are utterly indisposed, disabled and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to evil' – note that: we are opposed to all good and wholly inclined to evil - and therefore 'bound over to the wrath of God...' with all its fearful consequences.

Now of course statements like this raise huge questions about what we actually believe or supposed to believe as Christians, and it is no surprise that the Westminster Confession of Faith is under review. But I would suspect that our reading this morning from Luke's Gospel could be seen as supportive of the Westminster Confession. The Pharisee in the story, after all, simply does not recognise the reality of his own sin. He is convinced of his own goodness as he compares himself with others, thankful that he is not a thief and a rogue and an adulterer like them. And he is therefore guilty of one of the deepest and most destructive of sins, namely pride: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people...!' The tax collector, however, stands firmly with the Westminster Confession in beating his breast and declaring, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!' And so this story invites a humble acknowledgement that we are sinners in radical need of grace. Now what are we to make of all this? Well, we could have a fascinating discussion about sin, and about its centrality to our faith, and whether the Westminster Confession has got it right. But either way I would suggest to you that this story that Jesus told, whatever truth may be in it, is in danger of leaving us with a distorted and destructive view of sin and of ourselves as sinners. And the way I want to unpack this is by considering where the characters in the story are looking: where their eyes are focused, for this is very revealing. Let me explain.

Take the tax collector first. Something very significant that is said of him is that 'he would not even look up to heaven'. In other words his eyes are fixed downwards and this is a measure of his humility, his lack of the pride that consumes the Pharisee. And indeed it is good to see this man with his eyes and his head cast down, for tax collectors were hated and reviled. A tax collector in

Jesus' day was viewed as a nasty piece of work, despised for adding their own cut to the revenue extracted from poor peasants by the Roman Empire. They made money out of the poor, cheating them. And no doubt they were inclined to parade their wealth and to walk around with their heads held high. But now this tax collector is repenting and his eyes are fixed downwards in penitence. And here is the contrast with the Pharisee. The fact that we are told that as he prayed this tax collector 'would not even raise his eyes to heaven' implies that this is where the Pharisee's gaze was focused. He had no problems with this. With the rigorous respect for God's Law that characterised the religious zealots known as Pharisees, with his upright life, free from the sins of thieves and rogues and adulterers and tax collectors, why should he keep his head bowed? Why should he not look up and gaze at heaven?

Well, of course the Westminster Confession would say that this man is consumed with pride and that he must learn to look down and to bow his head, like the tax collector. The Westminster Confession would say that for all his piety this man's trust is in himself and not in the free grace and mercy of God. The great 16th century reformer John Calvin, who had a massive influence on the Westminster Confession of Faith, in his commentary on this passage says of the Pharisee that he 'suffered a repulse' from God because 'he trusted that God would be appeased by the merit of his works.' And one thing that is at the heart of the faith of the Reformation is that no-one appeases God by the merit of their works for we are saved by faith and by grace alone. And so we must all learn, like the tax collector, to bow our heads and to look down. So to quote Calvin again, commenting on this passage, he says that when it comes to prayer 'believers shall come into God's sight only single-minded and cast down...', and that human beings are 'so silly as to dare to exalt themselves against God...' The whole thrust is downwards: bow your heads downwards, fix your eyes downwards, lower your spirits downwards... And of course there is profound truth in this. The Christian faith begins by pointing us downwards. It begins with us submitting to God, on our knees, with our heads bowed, with our hearts humbled and spirits stooped, as we recognise one infinitely greater than us and upon whom we depend for salvation. That is a posture of humility. And in a world convulsed by power and power struggles and power games the only hope for a more a gentle and peaceful world comes from learning to bow: to bow before God, to bow before one another, to bow in recognition of our sins and failures. In a world drunk on power we need to learn humility that lowers our eyes and our heads.

There is, however, a problem with this. For you see there are people who have been compelled and constrained to look down and to bow all their lives – and told in effect to stay on their knees for that is their place. And faith too often affirms and reinforces that posture and keeps them there. So I don't know if you are aware that this month, October, is Black History month. Black History Month originated in the United States as an official annual celebration of African Americans, but it is now also observed unofficially in Ireland, the United Kingdom and here in the Netherlands, as a way of remembering and celebrating important people and events in the history of the African diaspora. And of course Africans and other black races are a kind of a symbol of those who too often have found themselves constrained to keep their eyes down and their heads bowed – though of course there are many others. And in keeping with Black History month and our passage and our theme this morning, with its focus downwards, I would like to read the African American writer Maya Angelou's wonderful poem, 'Still I rise':

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

And so she goes on... until the poem ends:

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

So in the context of a story where the emphasis is on the movement downwards, with eyes cast down and head bowed, Angela Mayo reminds us that there is also a movement upwards, a rising. And we recall that earlier in Luke's gospel when Jesus' mother Mary is told that she is to give birth to the Saviour she rejoices that God has scattered the powerful and the proud and lifted up the lowly.

Indeed Jesus ends the story by saying the same thing: 'for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.' And any version of the Christian faith that does not affirm and celebrate our exaltation by Christ is a joyless and oppressive religion. Yes, the Gospel brings us our knees before God in penitence and dependence upon God for mercy. But it does not leave us there. It raises us with Christ. It raises us to a new confidence and a new dignity and a new status as our salvation takes hold. We are exalted and we are called to the task of exalting all those others who are kept on their knees with their heads down and who are denied their full status as children of the living God.

To conclude: we've been thinking of the movement upwards and downwards in this story, contrasting the Pharisee with the tax-collector. Isn't it interesting though that the story begins with the words, 'Two men went up to the temple to pray', while near the end of the story we read that the tax-collector went down to his home justified? Up to the temple; down to his home... Maybe

the story would end best with the words, 'and from there he faced the world justified, with confidence and courage, looking it straight in the eye.' And that is where any subordinate Confession of Faith adopted by the Church of Scotland should take us. Amen.

Holy and loving God,
our maker, our lover, our friend,
we would lift up our hearts and
we would raise our heads to worship you,
you who are high and exalted above all things,
ruler and sovereign over all.
We would raise our eyes to see Jesus,
enthroned at your right hand,
far above every other power and authority.
We would lift our hands, empty and reaching up,
longing to be filled by your Spirit
who you pour out upon us.
But we come first with heads bowed,
and eyes cast down,
for we are humbled by your holiness
and we know ourselves to be sinners,
unworthy to enter your dwelling place.
Where sparrows build their nest
and swallow find their home we fear to tread
for we know what nests within our own hearts.
So we would each cry out,
'God have mercy upon me a sinner...'

O God who humbles the exalted and exalts the humble,
give us trust in our Saviour Jesus
who came to take away the sins of the world,
that we may live confidently and in the assurance
that we are loved and our lives graced.
For we pray in his name
and in his word we pray together, saying...