

Where are you standing?

[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14 ESV)

Our Gospel account today/this evening is an alternate one for Ash Wednesday and not the usual one about prayer and fasting. Today we have the well known story from Jesus about a Pharisee and tax collector going up to the temple to pray. We are told the context that Jesus told this parable to people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

It's the age old human problem of not comparing oneself to others – very hard to do. Of being religious without becoming smug or conceited or just that little bit proud. Of being humble when realising that noticing how humble we are smacks of anything but humility! We hear the Pharisee and go 'smug so and so' and we think 'good on you, mate' for the tax collector, no matter what sin or sins we think he's confessing. I think we imagine the Pharisee rather insufferable – but he'd still do the right thing in general – whereas with the tax collector, I wonder whether we'd loan him some money if he asked? We can think of this parable in behavioural terms – false repentance and true repentance – or in terms of righteousness that the Pharisee's impressive list of deeds – and it is impressive and disciplined – is not the basis for God's declaration, whereas we expect the tax collector to change his ways but he's started well with recognising that, before God, he is a sinner in need – and not deserving of – mercy – and this God declares him righteous.

Today / tonight I'd like you to consider the parable in terms of the temple and holiness / presence of God and the existence of sin. Picture the temple courtyards as packed with people. We imagine the priests are offering one of the daily sacrifices – during which an animal is given to be sacrificed, the animal is a substitution, and because of this sacrifice God forgives and people can come close to him. This is happening in the temple precincts and the people know all about it and can join it in prayer.

Now picture where these two men are. Here is the altar for sacrifice in front of the Holy Place (which contained the Holy of Holies). Where is the Pharisee? As close as he can to God. Where is the tax collector? As far from the action as possible. Why? Because they both know sin and holiness are not safe together – as far as sin is concerned.

Now my question is 'Who is around them?'. The tax collector is at the back we've assumed – far away – and he doesn't notice or care – he doesn't lift his eyes to heaven – he's beating his breast – as the women do in wailing and grief – he's distraught – and the simple answer is 'he doesn't care'!

Now about the Pharisee ... he's 'at the front' as close as he can get to the altar and God and what else ...? He's as far away from the other people as he can be because they might contaminate him, make him ritually impure. He's treating the people around him with the attitude of if they touch me, bump me, nudge me or I them, I'll die! Think of how his behaviour is. Think of his focus and attention. He is so busy being ritually right that he is blind to both his sin and God.

We begin this year's Lenten season with this alternate reading rather than the traditional one from Matthew 6 on prayer and fasting. Today / tonight we are reminded that sin is part of our lives – selfishness, pride,

tempers, hurting those around us deliberately or carelessly, and more – and we are trapped in it. There's no use blaming others, nor can we avoid others and even our good deeds – but by all means do them because not doing them makes life hard and painful! – are never good enough for our righteousness. What God looks for is a contrite heart – where sin is seen for what it is – a slave driver, a tyrant, a seducer, and a liar – and trapped in sin, we can only cry for mercy. And here's the wonder, God hears and is merciful.

The holy God comes close to us in the person of his Son and Jesus takes our sin onto himself and is destroyed so that we might be declared righteous each time we leave worship and go home. How we live in this righteousness is what taking up our cross is all about. But be careful you don't become a Pharisee in doing so. Tonight with ash and with bread and wine we acknowledge the truth of our sin and of God's mercy. Repentance is thus the mark of Christian discipleship.