

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Last Sunday after Trinity

readings: , [Ecclesiasticus 35.12-17](#) , [2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18](#) , [Luke 18.9-14](#)

23 October 2022

It's a wonderful thing that as the Canon for community learning I really enjoy studying Scripture! I honestly believe that hearing and absorbing Scripture is vital for us, it should make us grow and develop in our relationship with God, it should make us disciples, those who are ready to live by Scriptures' precepts. We know this. And this is good.

However... sometimes, we have taken a story or passage and as the famous collect would say: heard, read, marked, learnt and inwardly digested it to a point, that our understanding of that particular story becomes ossified, we think we understand this bit and that it means this and not that. That is perhaps, not so good. Basically, at that point, Scripture has stopped speaking to us afresh, we have become stuck! And Scripture that has become silent is a bit like a love affair gone stale, or if you want a better image, Scripture that has stopped speaking to us afresh, is a bit like that less than appealing Brazil nut once you've sucked all the chocolate off it!

And the gospel reading for today may just be one of those passages. At first glance, the parable is written so that we will identify with the humble tax collector, as opposed to the morally superior Pharisee. Be humble like the tax collector, and don't be haughty like that Pharisee, and you'll be justified before God. Simple, right?

Thank you God that I'm not like that Pharisee, or that drug dealer, or that man or woman who cheated on their spouse, or that young person I saw arrested for shoplifting at M&S the other day... Yes, Thank God. Oh and thank you God that I'm not like that annoying guy at work who is always full of ideas but is always late for meetings, or that woman who cut me up in traffic the other day, right after someone else had jumped the queue I was in at the bank – I have never jumped a queue in my life! Thank God, I'm not like other people... Oh and above all, thank you God that I'm not a that member of THAT political party... or the other one... Yes, Thank you God that I am not like other people!

Simple interpretations of parables can lead us into so much trouble...

There is another problem with the traditional interpretation of this parable. It can also unfortunately lead to perpetuating harmful ideas about the Jewish community. Never thought about it that way? Well, when we consciously or subconsciously perhaps make no distinction between Pharisee and Jewish, we are likely to be taken us down the well-trodden path of regarding Jewish people and Judaism as legalistic, elitist, and out of touch with God; at the more extreme end, it can actively lead to the kind of anti-Jewish hatred that has plagued Christianity since its inception and continues to cause harm today. We can never be reminded too often that Jesus was thoroughly Jewish, and that the great commandments (originally found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18) and all of Jesus' teachings have their roots in the Torah and the prophetic Jewish tradition.

So now that I have set some alarm bells ringing, how do we move from an either/or interpretation of this passage? How do we move from a simplistic The tax collector versus the Pharisee?

One way, would be to admit the complexity of all humanity and search for common ground. The famous Russian novelist and philosopher Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put humanity's complexity succinctly, he said: "The battleline between good and evil runs through the heart of every man (and woman)". We are complex beings – thanks be to God! And we can see that battle line between good and evil in the two characters in this parable, can we not?

The Tax Collector, the “goodie” in the story, is repenting because he has sinned – apparently greatly. Maybe he is repenting from extracting wealth unjustly from his community. Maybe that is why the Pharisee so despises him, because he sees him abusing his community... The Pharisee is haughty but he is also doing his best to be righteous and do what he thinks is important in God’s eyes. In fact, have you ever considered that perhaps his good works helped in the justification of the tax collector? Let me explain... When we pray “forgive us our sins” (Luke 11:4) we acknowledge how one person’s harmful acts can negatively impact a community. The flipside can also be true, can it not? After all, the righteous/good acts of one person can benefit the whole community. So maybe the Pharisee has in some way levelled off some of the worst abuses from the tax collector in his work in the community... we don’t know, but it is possible...

Nothing is black and white in this story... which is what makes it so powerful.

The more I thought about this passage the more it became about questions of identity. Did you notice how the Pharisee didn’t gather his confidence in God so much from the things he did for God, but by positioning himself over and against the Tax Collector? For him the not being like other people, was a stronger factor in his identity-building than being righteous – he mentions it first: “I thank you God that I am not like other people”.

For the Tax Collector, his identity was mainly about being a sinner – he didn’t trust his relationship with God enough to even look up.

What about you? What is your identity based on? For some people identifying with a particular characteristic or skill or talent is their main focus. For others is their education or job or ethnic group. But we are complex and it is often a mixture of things that build up our sense of identity. I did some research a few years ago, during the Brexit debate, about what it means to be white and English (I say English specifically because identity seems to rely on different factors for Scottish and Welsh populations). I discovered that being white and English was often such a poorly defined identity that it could only sustain itself by “not being the other”. Not being middle class, or working class, or immigrant or whatever. The danger of building an identity on not being the other is that it will inevitably lead to divided societies, as it did in Jesus’ time. These things are complex but fascinating. I believe that is why Jesus brought them up.

So, with some of these things in mind, how are you going to allow this passage to affect your life? I would love to know – and I’m here all week, come and chat!

Obviously, I’m not going to tell you how to pray or interact with God, apart from sowing the thought that it may just be worth, when you are next at your prayers, to question what your Christian identity relies on... And listen out for any alarm bells of “not being like... someone else!”

Happy scripture reading and happy praying.

Amen.

The Revd Carla Vicêncio Prior
Canon for Community Learning.