

*Jeremiah 14: 7-10,19-22    2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18    Luke 18: 9-14*

Hazel has just brought us Luke's story about the Pharisee and the Tax-collector praying in the temple. What were you and I thinking about it as we listened?

For Christians, it's such a well known tale that it's sometimes difficult to get behind the words to understand the significance of the occasion. Did your mind switch on to auto-pilot as we've heard these verses so often? Well, let's look at it all again.

Remember, Luke tells us that Jesus "told this tale to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous - and regarded others with contempt".

The word "Pharisee" has negative connotations these days - due to stories such as this one recorded in Luke's Gospel. But, in Jesus' day; Pharisees were respected holy men- religious leaders in the community, who kept disciplined and ordered faith alive, in very difficult circumstances under Roman rule. So Jesus's listeners expected usually to only hear good things about them. Many people would have expected the Pharisee to be the good guy in any story.

On the other hand, tax-collectors were despised -hated collaborators with the Roman rulers, and were seen as corrupt, money-grabbing low life. Listeners would certainly expect the tax-collector to be the baddie in any tale.

Jesus highlights the attitudes of the two men. The Pharisee stands alone, isolating himself from others and justifying himself to God, but his real focus is not on God at all, it's on himself. Just listen to his arrogance and self-centredness, "I thank you that I am not like other people. I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all my income".

Yes, he does obey and go beyond the demands of the religious laws, but he's puffed up with pride, bragging and being judgemental of others. He's the centre of his world, "Look at me - look how wonderful I am- look how much better I am than this tax-collector!"

The tax-collector has no such delusions of grandeur. He feels he has nothing to offer God by way of commendation. He comes as he is, bowed down with shame, and simply says, "God be merciful to me, a sinner" He focuses not on his sins but on God's mercy. He knows who he is in the sight of the almighty but loving and merciful God - and it brings him to his knees.

So, the Pharisee looks down on others, while the tax-collector looks up to God. As Jesus explains, "only one of them goes away 'justified'-- for, everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted".

This parable was very appropriate in biblical times and is just as relevant in this digital and technological age when success in so many aspects of life seems to depend on our being able to 'sell ourselves', to avoid saying sorry, and not to own up

to our mistakes. On the other hand, we find a major escalation of mental health disorders, often due to people not feeling they measure up to their own or others expectations of themselves, or trying to live up to a false image of themselves..

Its so easy for us to effectively put ourselves at the centre, stressing the good things we do and how well we do them - or alternatively, to think and talk about the awful things we've done and what a wretched person we are. Its can be very difficult not to be self-centred. Its also very hard not to measure ourselves against other people.

Our society encourages us to try to be better than others - the slimmest, the fittest, the greatest or the most accomplished in any field - and to make heroes of pop-stars, models, footballers and millionaires.

We seem to have lost sight of that eternal truth we once subscribed to - that every one of us is made in the image of God. The reflection of God is in every one of us. Whoever we are, we are all of worth. God loves us completely -so much so that, in Jesus, God was prepared to die for us- and then break through death into new life, bridging the space between us and God and reconciling us to himself for all time.

Its's not about anything we do, or don't do, but all about God's grace. God is not fooled by possessions, prestige or social standing. God sees the heart and any genuine cry of penitence. God loves us, and will never stop doing so. In that love, God is gracious and merciful when we fall short, when we get things wrong, when we sin. Which every one of us does!

Whenever we are unduly proud of our own achievements, rather than grateful to God for them, we share the Pharisee's blindness. Whenever we trust in our own soundness and experiences, we do indeed stand on our own. On the oher hand Jesus encourages us to keep focused on God, to see others as our merciful God sees them - utterly loved.

We are not in competition with one another- we have all fallen short, and we are all forgiven. Are we able to show to others the love, the mercy and the grace that we receive from God? Can we do that at home, on the streets, in the shops, and in how we use our time? If we have a bright idea, or a problem, do we ever check it out, talk it through, with our Father God?

Perhaps it would be enlightening, if each of us, between today and Christmas, were to write down in a notebook each day where we have seen God working -in ourselves and in others.

This would help us to focus on God, and to recognise that, despite all the current turmoil in the world (locally and internationally), God is at work, bringing order out of chaos, bringing life out of death. We are not alone. We can indeed rely on God. In God who is above all, in all, and through all. God yesterday, today and for ever, eternally offering us his love and mercy. How are you and I going to respond?

