

Sunday between 16<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> October [29]

Luke 18: 1-14

Jesus was constantly carrying on a teaching ministry everywhere he went, usually by parables, almost always with a human example in the story. The story may point us to a good example to follow, a bad example not to follow, or sometimes, as it does in today's gospel reading, to both. With regard to the second parable we just heard, there were those present with Jesus who, had he not pointed out which was the proper attitude, would have identified with the Pharisee and would not have seen anything wrong with his behaviour. These were the ones Jesus sought to reach. The Pharisee in the story corresponds well to what an anonymous author once said, "When someone sings his own praises, the tune is always too high."

It is true, of course, that we are all at risk of misunderstandings when it comes to how we perceive things as opposed to how others see a situation. For the original audience of this parable the Pharisee was the good guy, not only was he doing all the right things, he was well versed enough in his scripture to know that he was doing all the right things by God. He designed his life around the law and he was grateful for the structure and guidance of the law because it stopped him getting things wrong like the tax collector. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?

Jesus says otherwise, he points out the attitude rather than the actions of the Pharisee and commends the tax collector for setting aside himself and throwing himself on the mercy of God. So as Christians we are taught to value the attitude more than slavish adherence to rules just as Jesus taught. We recognise immediately that we hear this parable who the good guy is and who has missed the point. We are familiar with its teaching and we understand Jesus' lesson.

But it can be the case that we as a Church institution can sometimes fall into the bad habits of the religious leaders of Jesus' time. We can be guilty of putting rules and regulations in place that do little to bring people to faith and sometimes even drive people from it, it isn't our intention, but we are guilty of it nevertheless. We as individuals set out to follow Jesus as taught in scripture but we don't always get it right.

And this parable is centred around prayer and that is a really interesting aspect of our Christian faith to examine. Prayer is one of those things that is difficult to teach someone else. It can be a silence or spoken words. It can fill us with feelings or leave us free to feel nothing, it can be a moment long or a day's retreat. Prayer is as individual as we are and it's something we seldom discuss and many of us struggle with at some point.

We all have an idea how it should look and feel, particularly prayer in church. We can all pray, we've done it here today and we'll do much more of it before we leave. But do we do it with the right attitude, as the parable suggests? Here's an interesting thought, what would Jesus say about your attitude to prayer if he made you the subject of his parable?

This is not a request to share the answer publicly with anyone but for our own reflection here are a couple of things to think about. What do our actions say about our attitude? Do we come into church, in the presence of God having dressed up particularly for the occasion or do we see our relationship with God as a "take me as you find me" affair? Do we adopt a special position to pray, a kneel or bowed posture, open or clasped hands or do we think the prayer is internal and the body is not a part of it? What about the contents of your prayers, are they our own thoughts, thanksgivings and needs or prayers composed by others that say what we feel? None of these alternatives are right or wrong ways to go about prayer, just that we should perhaps use this parable as a reminder to consider how we pray.

It is very easy to fall into routine, we are creatures of habit after all, and just as we have routines for other parts of life so we will find a rhythm in prayer. But if prayer becomes a

task to get done on the never ending list of things to do, if it becomes routine to the point where we do it because we always have then we are at risk of becoming like the Pharisee and ticking the boxes of faith. Doing what we must to fulfil our obligations.

Imagine a relationship with a friend that was about fulfilling obligations to one another, it wouldn't leave much room for spontaneity, compassion or friendship as we understand it! But Jesus has invited us to be in relationship with God so a friendship is perhaps what it ought to feel like. It will naturally be an unequal friendship, God who is beyond our understanding is not the same as a person we've come to know as a friend, colleague or neighbour, but the elements of a human relationship are offered to us.

The first parable we heard from Jesus in the gospel today speaks of that relationship as we are likened to a persistent widow in conversation with an unjust judge. God hears our cries for help, and as in human relationships, considers the pain of the cry, the persistence of the need. Jesus tells us that if even an unjust judge will give justice simply to remove the annoyance of the persistent widow, how much more will God who loves and cares for us, hear our prayers and answer them.

Relationship with God through Jesus is not about a remote authority with rules to follow and orders to obey. We cannot win God's approval by ticking the boxes of living a faithful life, we cannot impress the creator of humanity by any human endeavour, we are accepted by grace and by grace alone. But because we cannot prove anything to God we ought to have nothing to prove to one another. Our relationship with God is not about how others see us and our holiness but how it feels to be in relationship with God and the only ones who know how that feels are each of us, individually, and God. Just as no one else can know how your relationship with your best friend works, neither can anyone else know about you and God. We can have a fair guess of what it feel like to have a best friend, but one relationship is not the same as another. So it is with God, and prayer is the way we communicate within that relationship.

So perhaps it doesn't matter if we sit or stand, open our hands or close them, use our words or someone else's, if we are in a right relationship with God then we will feel it. We each of us need to constantly strive for that feeling of relationship with God, not by looking at how others do it, not by worrying about what others think of how we do it, simply by finding a way to pray, and in that prayer to admit to God how our relationship works, God is almighty, we are unworthy, by grace we have a relationship, Praise be to God!