

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Reflection – Last Sunday after Trinity – 23rd October 2022

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Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it; and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice; for the Lord is the judge, and with him there is no partiality. These words from Ecclesiasticus relate closely to today's gospel passage – the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. In the light of the current shenanigans around tax policy we might be tempted to judge both characters pretty harshly, as harshly as we may judge some of our politicians. But before we think about this Sunday's readings, let's consider why today marks an important shift in the Church's year.

You've probably grown used to a lot of green vestments over the past few months – but today is the 22nd Sunday of Trinity and so, the last. Soon we're into Christ the King and then a whole new year begins again with Advent. We rarely stop to consider why the accounts of Jesus' parables and teaching begin by celebrating the Trinity, or why this 'season' lasts for almost half the Church's year. How does the idea of God as Three Persons relate to Christ's teaching? At the top of your service sheet you can see the Rublev icon of the Trinity. Perhaps this can give us some clues about the nature of God.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul has a desire and longing to enter the courts of the Lord. These words from today's psalm show us that God is where we feel at home - like the sparrow who *has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young.* It continues: *O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; listen, O God of Jacob.* Our prayer leads us home to God. The Old Testament reading and gospel today are both concerned about how we present ourselves before God in prayer.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is well-known. It's often characterized simply as a warning against hypocrisy – but is it really as simple as that? After all, the Pharisee's lifestyle is not bad. He goes well beyond what the Law requires of him. He tithes on **all** his income, so his giving is self-sacrificial. In addition, he fasts not once a week as expected, but **twice**. He's praying in the right place, with the correct posture – in fact, he's fulfilling all the outward requirements and more. It's hard to class this as hypocritical behaviour.

By contrast, the tax collector would have been seen as a swindler, virtually a thief. Local tax collection was privatized. Contracts went to the highest bidder, who set their own rules. You can guess why they were so roundly detested! Jesus' judgement would have been utterly shocking to those that heard it. Christians have often handed down a very negative image of the Pharisees (not to mention, the Jews in general!), but although we might think of the Pharisees as unpopular, they were often admired in Jewish society. The one in this parable would seem to listeners a paragon of virtue. Why on earth would Jesus say that this 'worthless' tax collector would go home more *justified* than the other?

Is Jesus perhaps drawing our attention to the way these men prayed? Knowing his many failings, the tax collector throws himself on God's mercy. He's so ashamed that he's *standing far off* – hardly daring to go into the place where he'd be expected to pray. *He would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast.*

The contrast with the Pharisee's prayer is marked. He begins with thanks, it's true – but then goes on to make a statement all about himself, what **he** has done for God. Yes, he's thankful, but his prayer is on the point of being self-congratulatory. Before listing all his own achievements, he says: *God, I thank you that **I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector.*** In contrast, as Ian Boxall comments in a commentary on the parable, the tax collector's *prayer is honest, and it is God-centred rather than self-centred.* The words quoted earlier from Ecclesiasticus are clear about how we should pray: *Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it; and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice; for the Lord is the judge, and with him there is no partiality. He will not show partiality to the poor.* God desires honest relationships. We can't buy his love. His grace and mercy are

freely given, to rich and poor alike. His ways are not our ways: he does not judge the way we humans do.

Apart from on Trinity Sunday itself, we may rarely think much about why God as Three Persons is so central to our Christian faith. In her very interesting book, *The creation of a self-creating world*, Beatrice Bruteau discusses the relationship between God as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit. When you look at the Rublev icon, what do you see? How would you describe these three persons as they sit together around a table laid for Communion? What is being expressed in their gestures and their glances? There's love, tenderness, grace and sharing. These are our understandings of a God who is Love, love shared in a community. As Bruteau says, *God is being in every possible way, a community of existence which must be both one and many – the union of unity and multiplicity.*

This is what the Pharisee misses completely – the graciousness of God's love towards all his creation. He was sufficiently well-off to be able to tithe the entirety of his wealth whilst not being driven to starvation and penury. Did he know what had driven the tax collector to have to do the dirty work he was so obviously ashamed of? Did he understand the depths of despair of a man driven to do awful things in order to provide for himself and his family? Can we ever really know, as God knows, what has and is going on in the lives of those we condemn? God's nature is always to be merciful and gracious. Jesus puts words from Psalm 51 into the mouth of the tax collector: *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"* In doing so, he would have been reminding his listeners of how the psalm goes on: *The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

To quote the German theologian Joachim Jeremias: *The character of God, says Jesus, is such as described in Psalm 51. He welcomes the despairing, hopeless sinner, and rejects the self-righteous. He is the God of the despairing, and for the broken hearted his mercy is boundless. That is what God is like, and that is how he is now acting through me.*

For Christians, Jesus is the Way and the Truth. His life and teaching bring us to the Life he offers. The introduction to the parable underlines its meaning. Jesus *also*

told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. Not only were Pharisees present. Jesus' own followers and disciples were there too. Ian Boxall comments: Perhaps this is less a parable about two kinds of people than two kinds of prayer. The Pharisee's prayer reveals how piety can so easily lapse into self-satisfaction. Though he begins by thanking God, he does so first for what he is not (like other people) and second for what he has done for God, rather than what God has done for him. The parable is a clear warning against setting our own judgement above God's.

The Holy Trinity is our model of God as Love. Just as the divine love flows endlessly between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our love must flow between the persons with whom we live and move and have our being in the life with which God has blessed us. The moment we set ourselves apart, as better or more worthy of God's love than other people, we forget the words of Saint Paul that we'll soon say as we join together in Holy Communion: ***Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.***

Amen