

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 30 October 2019 10.00am
Helen Cornick

I've got a few questions for you this morning. Not particularly difficult questions - they relate to the reading that we have heard. We heard a parable.

Who were the characters in the parable? The Pharisee and the tax collector.

Where were they? At the Temple.

What were they doing? Praying.

A parable, a story - Who told the story? Jesus.

Who was he telling it to? 'He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.'

We have had a friend staying with us for part of this week, and she wanted to go to London Zoo on Thursday. Since I have an annual ticket for the zoo, and I haven't used it very much, I was very pleased to go with her. Less pleased when we realised what the weather was like on Thursday, but nevertheless, we went.

When the rain got harder, we tried to find somewhere under cover, so went into buildings to see the animals which were inside, and on one such occasion, we went into the reptile house.

We had fun searching for the animals which were well camouflaged - lizards, snakes and frogs - and I was pleased that there were pictures of the animals in each area which at least gave us a clue as to what colour they were. This directed our search to things of similar colours where we might find the creatures! It took me quite a while to notice a crocodile hidden below the water - despite its size!

And in contrast, other animals were brightly coloured, and whether they were large or small could be spotted easily. They stood out. They knew how to show off. And so we reflect on the parable: the Pharisee was showing off, he was arrogant. He was standing alone, thanking God that he was so special - not like other people - the rogues, thieves, adulterers - or even (and perhaps especially) like the tax collector.

He was telling God what he had done - fasting twice a week, and tithing - giving one tenth of *all* that he had. He was a man who had done what the law required of him to put him right with God - and more - showing God total commitment.

The Pharisees were the pillars of the temple community. They were respected. People looked up to them. They kept the rules. They were religious, and knew how to do things correctly. They kept the place in order. Where would the Temple be without the Pharisees?

To those listening to the parable for the first time, the Pharisee was the one who the people would have held up as the role model, the one they would have looked up to. So what actually happened in Jesus' parable would have come as a shock.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was despised by the people. Unlike modern day tax collectors, who are just civil servants doing a job, tax collectors in Jesus' time worked for the Romans and got as much money as possible from the people from their own country, so that after paying the Romans, they had money left over for themselves. You will remember the story of Zacchaeus.

So notice how the tax collector was when he prayed. While standing, as was the usual way to pray, he was stood further off. He had distanced himself from the other people, and was bending over, not looking towards heaven. He was beating his breast in repentance. 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' were the words *he* used. He recognised that he was sinful and was ashamed, so couldn't face 'looking at' God. And he didn't want to be on show to everyone else around either!

Notice how many times we hear the word 'I' in the Pharisee's prayer: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

He is very self-centred - whereas the tax collector is under no illusion about himself - he hardly strays away from words about God's compassion: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'. One pleads for God's mercy, yet the other seems to believe that forgiveness can be earned by righteous works.

And Jesus says of the tax collector: 'I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other'. By acknowledging his failings, it was the tax collector's broken relationship with God which was healed. It was he who was made right with God - ironically, it was him who was able to go away from the Temple with his head held high.

This parable is another example of role reversal that we often find in Luke's gospel. Almost at the outset of the gospel we hear Mary's Magnificat, the song of how the humble are raised up and the mighty are brought down from their thrones; the hungry being fed and the rich being sent away empty.

So many times Jesus confronts the view that those in power and authority haven't quite understood what God is about - and so many times, he spends time with the poor, the sick, the women, the outcast and the foreigner and treats them with greater respect than those who the world counts as worthy.

We can't judge who is to be exalted and who is to be humbled. However, if we are aware of our own weaknesses and frailties, and our need of God's grace, and we confess to almighty God, we know that there is compassion and love which can forgive our shortcomings - our sins - and restore to us a new relationship, bringing true transformation.

We have no claim on this forgiveness - it is God's free gift which we can receive just as in this parable, we find an example of God reaching out to the one who recognised his worthlessness.

On the contrary, if we see ourselves as righteous, and are self-centred, there is less opportunity for change to reach the potential which God has in store for us.

Am I - are you - the tax collector or the Pharisee? Jesus is warning away from the actions of the Pharisee - the tendency to appear self-righteous; but also the tax collector needs to be brought up out of his despair and self pity, for this is not an ideal state to be in either. Luke goes on in his gospel to talk about Jesus welcoming the children - who are able to receive God's kingdom as a free gift.

Who was Jesus telling this parable to? Jesus told this parable 'to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.' Is it wrong like the Pharisee to fast? Is it wrong to tithe your money and possessions? Is it wrong to consider where you stand before God? No.

Where the Pharisee got it wrong, was in regarding the tax collector - and the rogues, thieves and adulterers with contempt, with disrespect. We need to guard against being one of these people who trust in ourselves that we are righteous and regard others with contempt.

God through Jesus calls us all into a relationship with him, which we can enter by God's free grace. By God's own invitation to come. Will you accept God's invitation?