

St. Philip's Anglican Church — Sunday 28 October 2007

Revd Rob Lamerton

*Joel 2.23-32, Psalm 65, 2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18, Luke.18.9-30*

In today's reading we begin by hearing that Jesus told a story "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Then he proceeds to tell about the Pharisee who told God how good he was!

This was evidently not unusual. Dr Caird in his commentary on this passage says:

Rabbinic literature provides enough parallels to show that Jesus' portrait was no caricature. An old prayer from the Jewish Prayer Book runs: 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast not made me a Gentile. Blessed art Thou who hast not made me a slave. Blessed art Thou . . . who hast not made me a woman' (cf. Gal. 3.28). It is reported also in the Talmud (*Berakoth*, 28b) that Rabbi Nehunia ben Hakaneh used to pray daily on leaving the rabbinical school: 'I give thanks to thee, O Lord, my God, that thou hast set my portion with those who sit in the house of instruction, and thou hast not set my portion with those who sit in street corners, for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early for words of Torah and they rise early for frivolous talk; I labour and they labour, but I labour and receive a reward and they labour and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the life of the world to come and they run to the pit of destruction.'

The Pharisee is self congratulatory. In fact he is so good that he has not recognised his need for mercy.

The tax collector, on the other hand, is totally aware of his humanity and failure and of God's mercy. "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" He recognises his great need, *and* the grace of God. He is the one who is justified (put right) with God. He is the one who truly recognises what the prophet Joel had said, that "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

The Psalm is all about God's wonderful blessings. The Pharisee missed the need to recognise God's gifts, preferring to claim some preferential treatment.

The story of the tax collector is one of humility and trust. Luke has placed the stories of the children brought to Jesus and of the rich young ruler immediately afterward to add to the whole story of trust and dependence.

The story about the children is a rebuke to the attitude that regards children as less than adults or of lesser value to God. It is the ability of children to be receptive and open to God and to things spiritual that Jesus commends. "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it." It is almost an illustration of the attitude of the tax collector, which is repentant, trusting and receptive. The Pharisee, however, was closed off.

So children are natural models of discipleship!

The story of the rich young man (Luke says he was a ruler, whereas Matthew's gospel tells us he was young) seems to be a depiction of the Pharisee who knows all that is needed of basic religious teaching. He was *satisfied*

with what he had done and thought he could pick up a few tips on entering eternal life!

Jesus pointed out that he had needed to let go and trust God. When Jesus asked, “Why do you call me good?” and said that no one is good but God alone, he was pointing the man to the source of all goodness and blessing! The eternal life that the man sought is not about gaining more theological knowledge. It is about living in the presence of God day by day. The man had failed to understand the question, let alone find the answer.

In this case, the man’s wealth and possessions stood in the way of receptive faith (faith like that of the child!). He trusted in his riches. The same can be true of all sorts of other things we value—intellectual, moral, even spiritual wealth. It really is about grace!

Neither does Peter understand, thinking that he and the other disciples deserve a better deal because they have made the sacrifice. Jesus, however, promises that they will have much more before they get to eternal life in the age to come.

Humility, receptivity, and letting go are the things that enable us to experience the grace of eternal life.