

2019-03-10 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Canon Judy Hunt

Luke 18: 9 – 14

'Pharisee and Tax Collector'

Introduction ...

When Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was working on the words of the Confessions in the first version of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) – I think he must have had tonight's parable from **Luke 18** in mind. In the story, there is praise for the one who said: **'God be merciful to me, a sinner.'**

And so in the Confession for Evening Prayer comes the statement:

There is no health in us ...

Followed by the plea:

O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.

In the BCP Communion service – the language is even stronger:

We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness ...

We are heartily sorry for these our misdoings

the remembrance of them is grievous unto us

the burden of them is intolerable.

Is that how we feel?

Is it how we should feel?

Good questions for the First Sunday in Lent!

As some of you know, my Mum – with inhibitions removed by Alzheimer's is quite likely to say something along the lines of:

'Well, I'm not a miserable offender'

and turn to the person next to her to say:

either: **'That's you, then'**

Or : **'Are you a miserable offender?'**

But I think this comes originally from a genuine concern. I remember years ago being asked by her about the language in these confessions – and especially about **not** feeling that her personal sin was **'an intolerable burden' ...**

How to view?

How to view? How to respond? How do we feel these words of **'miserable sinner ... intolerable burden' ...** fit ... or don't fit our lives, our experience?

I think that there are a number of different insights.

On an individual, personal response: there are some people, at some points in their lives who have sinned greatly – who have inflicted great evil on others, against God ... in those cases this **PTO**

language is entirely appropriate ... at least it is until confession – true repentance and forgiveness with new life have been undertaken and received.

But how about in more ordinary lives?

Two things here:

Firstly – we mustn't ever underestimate or downplay that fact that what might seem little or insignificant to us may have had what seems like a disproportionately major effect on someone else. The 'off the cuff' comment – or the lack of a comment ...

It only takes a few drops of poison to contaminate a whole glass of water.

So although the BCP language may seem too extreme ... we shouldn't minimise sin.

And secondly – when we confess our sins together corporately ... there is a sense in which we are doing so as part of the humanity that has messed up so much:

squandering of resources

unjust structures

climate change

and so on ...

Looked at in this way ... perhaps we're more able to say, with depth of sincerity:

'the burden is intolerable' ...

Conclusion ...

So our reading and our BCP have much material for reflection this Lent ... but we mustn't allow this reflection to overshadow the forgiveness and potential for change and new life that Jesus won for us on the cross.

To do so would be to ignore the fact that following Jesus brings Good News:

Forgiveness and Freedom.

Amen.