

Luke 18: 9 – 14; 2 Timothy 4: 6 – 8, 16 – 18

When I was little – a long time ago – playtime at Primary School could sometimes be a bit difficult – I was quite shy so I think I was mostly an observer from the often draughty, edges of the playground ... a place to keep out of trouble, out of being bullied. Older children were often racing around declaring they were kings and queens of breaktime and I'm sorry to say confronting each other with 'usually unrealised' threats and as I see them now, far-fetched claims about their power and their rights. It generally revolved around shouting "my Dad's bigger than your Dad", "my Dad's a football captain", "my Dad (not often My Mum) "My Dad's ... a POLICEMAN and he'll arrest you all or send you to prison" shouted a girl called Beatrice ... "oh no he's not" ... and so it went on. I shrank further into the playground wall ... arrested, prison?! Oh no?! The thing is I knew he actually was a policeman (unlike all those other false claims) ... I'd seen him at her house when I was walking home from school ... a few years later, when I was braver and I went to her birthday party, it turned out he was really funny and very kind and undoubtedly oblivious to his daughter's egotistical claim to be able to use his power.

I suppose it's our human instinct to protect ourselves by exalting our own egos and convincing all those around us that we have the true knowledge of how things should be, that gives us the sole right to power. We can also make ourselves feel safer by being part of the group that offers that power to those with much larger egos than our own.

Has there ever been a time when someone's confident opinion of themselves hasn't resulted in egotistical leadership creating divided or frightened communities? Of course not – neither in the past or now. It's easy to see the danger of self-aggrandisement among the dictators of the world – Putin in Russia – Xi in China – Khamenei in Iran ... but even in our democracies, our own leaders seem often to be blindsided by their own self-confidence and a reluctance to recognise their inadequacies. "My plan's bigger than your plan" ... "I derive my power from my position, my status!" "My authority as ... Prime Minister, Bishop, parish priest, headteacher, matriarchal, patriarchal ... is unquestionable." Whether the term is used or not, once someone has a recognised position of authority there is a sense that the role is ordained and untouchable ... of course as we've seen this week it is not untouchable and an ego can be brought down ... but what is it that makes such iconoclasm necessary and/or inevitable?

It is, I would suggest, an in-built fault in human reasoning ... we put position and power ahead of humanity and love. We don't trust ourselves to be able to survive unless we, or the people we choose are in charge of things ...

... and yet, our Gospel reading this week ended with the words: ***"all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."***

The story Jesus tells ... the parable of two men praying ... seems very easy to understand. It reminds us that how we, as individuals, or as a collective church, see ourselves, is not necessarily how God sees us, or indeed how God wants us to be. One man, the Pharisee has pole position: he is "chosen" probably by family connections, to be the enforcer of God's law – except that he doesn't really know or understand that law, not as it is revealed to us by Jesus. The other man, the tax collector is despised. He is a collaborator with the occupying power, he makes his living by cheating and fraud – he will be unwelcome in the Temple. And yet **we** are already attuned to Jesus' teaching and to his actions ... we **know** the outcome of this parable will be to remind us which one of these two men will be justified by his faith – and we know it won't be the Pharisee.

So, is this just another point at which Jesus takes the opportunity to undermine the Pharisees, to point out their failures and weaknesses and to dismiss their authority?

Not really – are his teachings ever as simple as that ... well, even apparently simple messages carry deep truths and deep meaning:

1. Jesus doesn't address his words to a crowd intent on causing an uprising against the religious authorities, but in the company of his disciples they are addressed to a group of Pharisees who have been asking him questions. It is therefore another plea to the Pharisees themselves to re-order their thinking, to find the truth in God's calling and accept that it is by God's grace we are saved, not by religious laws and liturgies that exclude the majority of people.
2. The tax-collector is a frequent character in the Gospels ... he could be almost a pantomime villain ... here's a tax-collector ... the audience boos ... but in his treatment of Zacchaeus and his calling of Matthew ... we see that redemption is available to even the deepest of sinners, who unlike the Pharisees **have** found the truth in God's calling.
3. Having already heard the passage from 2 Timothy this morning ... we know that the writer, almost certainly not Paul, but his student and possibly successor ... is reminding us of the immense work that Paul has done and of Paul's confidence that he will be justified in God's heavenly kingdom – but it is not a justification based on Paul's status or position, but on his own faith and confidence in knowing that what he has endured even in the face of betrayal by other Christians is not a discouragement, but a joy that brings him to Christ. Alone and in prison, Paul reflects on the loneliness of his end days, but reminds us that in true prayer we are **never** alone.
4. **a)** Therefore as we return to the Gospel – one man confirms his piety and requests God to acknowledge it. He stands upright and prays aloud, uses his companion in prayer as a means to show his own superiority in this religious society.
b) The tax collector – stands in the shadow, head bowed, not looking up, pounding his chest (an action usually attributed to women in that time, but denoting extreme anguish in a man). He sees the gulf between himself and what God asks of him and throws himself on God's mercy.

In essence this passage teaches us about how we might come to God without presumption, without assuming we have some divine right because of our own status or role ... it tells us how we need, in prayer, to place ourselves honestly and humbly before the mercy of God. So let us set aside our badges of virtue, our confidence derived from the praise of those whose own interests are vested in our success ... let us come humbly to God, to serve others in the name of Christ and to replace our own ego with the self-denial of true faith.

Amen