

## The Last Sunday after Trinity (Year C/OT30) 2019

I don't know if you have ever heard of an early twentieth century American evangelist called Billy Sunday who one said that the best outcome for a person coming to faith at a revivalist meeting would be for them to repent, realise that they were justified in Christ, their personal saviour, walk out of the venue and be run over by a lorry. There would be no chance of backsliding, no opportunity to engage with everyday life or of being led into temptation. Just, bang and Alleluia!

A bit of a corny story, but today as we give thanks for our church here in Cuckfield, we have an interesting parable to contemplate which informs not just our personal journeys - our personal identities as members of the Body of Christ – but also that of the world-wide Church.

At first reading, the Gospel passage seems to be unequivocal in the call to identify with the tax collector rather than the Pharisee. Luke wants us to recognise the running theme of his Gospel, first mentioned in the Magnificat – reversal: *'He has shown strength with his arm: he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their seat: and exalted the humble and meek.'* But is that what is happening here? Jesus comments, yes, that the man who stood at the back beating his breast and crying, *'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'* was the one who went home justified. But herein lies the problem for me. In fact, it seems to me that Jesus calls us to think carefully about our own journey of Faith, together with the way in which we balance the different elements of our lives. What does justification mean to us? Is this true justification? Does justification mean **anything** to those outside the doors of this church!

The Pharisee leads a blameless life as far as the Law seemed to require. He fasts twice a week (unusual for the time) and tithes his income. He seeks to do all he can to follow God faithfully – righteously – so where is he going wrong? It seems that the letter of the Law is being followed, but not the spirit. In comparing himself to sinners, 'thieves, rogues, adulterers and the tax-collector,' he finds himself better than them, he puts himself at the centre of the picture. He shows contempt for others, judging and labelling them with condescension. This is self-justification in the name of faith. **But** there is a balance to be had. We end up doing the same as him if we read this parable in a black and white way yet live our lives through self-justification.

- God, I thank you that I am not like those conservative evangelicals, who think that they are justified through faith, kow-towing to your inerrant word.
- God, I thank you that I am not like those liberal agenda-driven Christians, bending over backwards to show how soft and cuddly they are and who don't respect every word in the Bible as I do.
- God, I thank you that I am not a Boris-hugging Conservative.
- God, I thank you that I am not a Jeremy Corbyn Labourite.
- Thank God that I am not black, white, straight, gay, transgender, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Hindu, an atheist, a secularist.....

You can make your own list!

You see how easy it becomes to label others and to feel superior. We are called to **balance** our own prejudices through the lens of faith. This doesn't mean that we can't comment on situations informed by our faith, but we see the dreadful consequences in so many areas of life, both within our own and other societies through name calling and the sin of merely identifying ourselves through one aspect of who we are rather than knowing the richness of life which we are all offered. The Christian Faith is one which calls us to know that every person we meet is made in the image of God. We are connected not just to our brothers and sisters in Christ (indeed, we should be strengthened by this) but with the whole of humanity.

So when I speak of **balance**, I think that it is useful to look at the tax-collector dispassionately as well. During the time of Jesus, tax collectors were instruments of the Roman occupying power. Hated by ordinary people, they were known to fiddle the books and demand bribes. Although we see this man hiding at the back of the synagogue, barely able to raise his eyes to heaven and disparaging himself as a sinner, we don't see a desire to change beyond what he is at present. Will he try to make restitution to the people he has stolen from or diddled? Will he address his deficit as a member of the household of Israel in some way? He is justifying whom he is in a different way! I recognise the value of self-examination; the realisation that he has put his own welfare beyond everything else. But will he move on and change his life

Ultimately, I don't believe that it is all about a bad Pharisee or a good tax-collector. Looking at both, we might want to say to the Pharisee, 'Yes, you are grateful for your godly life, Well done you.' To the tax-collector, we might want to say, 'Thank God for your humility – what an example!' But to both we should say that it is no good remaining in that one moment of gratitude or self-abasement. They are both stuck in time. Life needs balance and they need move on from gratitude or penitence and self-justification to journeying faithfully, acknowledging that life is a mosaic of different experiences. It is how we put the pieces together informed by faith that matters. Will the mosaic be an incomprehensible jumble or a glorious technicolour picture of grace?

The true gift to us from the Pharisee is a love for the blessings of our Faith. The true gift of the tax-collector to us, are his words: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' The moment we think or breathe those words and cast our true selves upon God, we experience his love without conditions or limits.

What good would it be to be saved in faith, only to then be run over by a lorry? Yes, life has many twists and turns, but it is when we think that we **ourselves** have all the right answers that the real problems arise, because when we do, we cease to need the knowledge of God's wondrous love for each one of us, cease to recognise our call to the constant journey of Resurrection Life Jesus Christ calls us to – **this** is the ultimate answer. Gratitude for the blessings of this life, hand in hand with true humility draws us forward on our journey, so that in acknowledging that even in our sorrows, our prejudices, addictions, faults and failures we can find TRUE life and TRUE joy, yet above all possessing the gift of revealing to the world the knowledge of the openness of God's Love - the fulness of life's journey - to which **all** are welcome in Jesus Christ.



### **Ecclesiasticus 35: 12-17**

- <sup>12</sup> Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford.  
<sup>13</sup> For the Lord is the one who repays, and he will repay you sevenfold.  
<sup>14</sup> Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it;  
<sup>15</sup> and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice; for the Lord is the judge,  
and with him there is no partiality.  
<sup>16</sup> He will not show partiality to the poor;  
but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.  
<sup>17</sup> He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan,  
or the widow when she pours out her complaint.

### **2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18**

<sup>6</sup> As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.  
<sup>16</sup> At my first defence no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! <sup>17</sup> But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. <sup>18</sup> The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

### **Luke 18: 9-14**

<sup>9</sup> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." <sup>13</sup> But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'