

The Pharisee and the Publican

Today's theme is telling us to focus on God and not on ourselves. I wonder which of the two characters in this gospel story you prefer, is it the Good living Pharisee or the sinful Tax collector or Publican as he is sometimes called.

Let's take a look at them both.

Each man described themselves. The Pharisee was a righteous man but his key word is "I", instead of gratitude to God.

The publican, a thief and a crook but has a sincere confession.

The Pharisee, often told off by Jesus, often trying to trip him up. They would nearly always be in the front row, thinking up trick questions. They were the crowd who gathered round the woman caught in adultery with big stones in their hands and bigger stones in their hearts. Yet a lot of the Pharisees were very good people you know. Before Christ came they separated themselves from those Jews who were going pagan and materialistic. The word Pharisee means "separated". So they separated themselves from the *godless* ones and tried to preserve God's words and ways as revealed to them in the Old Testament.

St. Paul was a Pharisee and proud of it. Nicodemus, the man who gave his family tomb for our Lord's burial was also a Pharisee. They weren't all villains; but being human like the rest of us, some of them became legalistic, that is smug, self-righteous and hypocritical. The fellow in today's gospel story is a prime example.

Up he went to the front of the temple, with his halo in place and his wings nicely spread. Apparently he spoke as if purring to himself: I thank you God, he said (and looking as pleased as punch) that I am not like the rest of the people round here; I'm not the least bit greedy; I've never been unjust. As for adultery, you must be joking, it's never even crossed my clean mind. And as for this creep down at the back I don't know why he's ever allowed in here at all. Did I tell you my other virtues? No. Then I'll tell you now. I fast every week, twice, on two separate days. I give up a tenth of everything I own, Lord save us, I can't get over how good I am. You must think very highly of me, and if there's any justice at all, I'm bound to get into heaven.

Perhaps I have exaggerated a bit but it's just to show the difference between the two men.

You see the one at the back of the church never raised his head at all, kept looking down at the floor. He was not considering the height of his virtue but the weight of his sins. The only movement he made was to beat his breast. The only prayer he uttered was a prayer for mercy. What dominated his prayer more than anything else was a genuine humility. According to Jesus, it was his humility his sorrowfulness and his repentance that put him to rights with God. The pride of the Pharisee did not.

Although this parable needs no explanation, it does merit some reflection if we are to apply the message that it contains to our lives today. This gospel puts into words shameful attitudes that many of us possess but are reluctant to admit. The strange thing is that as we listen to the story

our sympathy goes out to the tax collector, the publican thief, whose broken heart has nothing to offer God except sorrow for his failings. However in real life aren't we more inclined to imitate the Pharisee? We all want to be recognised and thanked for the good works we do. In everyday life when we boast or brag, put ourselves on pedestals and appear better than we are in reality, tinges of the Pharisee emerge in our character. We pride ourselves on our achievements and we forget that pride eats away at the core of the human heart. It is only when we empty ourselves of pride that we come to realise how totally dependent we are upon God.

This gospel contains a warning for all church goers, let us exalt God not ourselves for grace is a gift from God and cannot be bought or even earned.

What practical conclusions do we draw for ourselves from today's parable?

The first thing we need to do, while recognising the good in our lives, is to recognise the sinfulness too and pray for God's mercy. That's one of the first things we ask in our weekly worship services, just in case we would be holding onto our halos and flapping our wings. "We confess that we have sinned; Lord, have mercy!"

The second thing we need to do is to be morally modest. No moral high ground for us. That doesn't mean setting moral values aside. Values like justice, honesty, chastity and truth are to be celebrated and lived. Having moral standards and convictions is very important for all of us. What our lord is saying is that none of us can afford to feel morally superior to others. My sin may not be your temptation. Your struggle may be greater than mine. Your failure in my eyes may, from God's perspective, be an enormous success. How can I judge unless I know? Why should I judge when I have my own sins to contemplate?

The next four lines of verse sum it up nicely.

Do not find fault with the man

Who limps or stumbles along the road

Unless you have worn the shoes he wears

Or struggled beneath his load.

The Pharisee started off by thanking God that he wasn't like the publican. Wouldn't it be ironic if we felt like thanking God that we weren't like the Pharisee? Do we think we are not?

What do you want to be when you grow up is the question we often ask our children.

The answer we should give as children of God is: "I'd like to be a publican" seeking mercy, and truly sorry.

Amen.

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