

Sunday 23rd October

Ecclesiasticus 35:12-17
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

I remember when I was still at junior school I once went to a friend's house. His older brother had just bought a tape recorder – something we didn't have at home and something I had never really seen before. It was one of those reel to reel ones – you may remember them.

We were messing around recording each other and playing the recordings back. It was the first time I had heard my own voice as others hear it. And I was shocked. It didn't sound a bit like I thought I sounded. It took me many years after before I was able to listen to recordings of myself again. I didn't like what I had heard. It didn't sound like the me I thought I was.

And a similar thing happened during the lockdown when we were videoing people doing intercessions or readings for our online services. Some didn't like to see recordings of themselves and were therefore very reluctant to make the videos.

Which is all strange really, because tape recordings and videos only show us what others see and hear all the time. It's as if we have a fear of seeing ourselves as others see us. Like we have a certain image of ourselves – the me I want to be or the me I think I am – which isn't the same as the person others see. Perhaps in some way we are just deluding ourselves as to who we are.

Like the Pharisee in today's gospel reading.

Its quite plain what he thought he was like. Pious, law abiding, honest, generous, respectable and accepted in God's sight because of the person he was (or thought he was). And its quite clear as well what the tax collector in the story thought of himself. Someone who had made big mistakes, whose life was a mess, who was not worthy to be in the temple in the first place let alone be accepted by God.

And it turns out neither was right.

So I wonder – what do you think about yourself?. What is the image you have of yourself. How would you describe yourself?

I guess for most of us that would be mixed. We probably think we are better than we really are in some areas of our lives, and worse in others. But I am sure that other people see us differently from the way we see ourselves, sometimes because we are just wrong about ourselves and sometimes because we put on masks to hide the real truth.

But how does God see us? That surely is a more important question to ponder.

The first thing to say is that God sees us as we really are. He knows the truth about us. The words of Psalm 139 describe this knowledge beautifully:

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

And Jesus himself talks of God knowing the tiniest details about us:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted.

Maybe that is a scary thought for us. God knowing all there is to know about us. Even those things that we would prefer to keep hidden. Every last bit about us. No secrets.

It surely means there is no fooling God. We cannot be like the Pharisee and claim all is well when we know deep down that it isn't.

But the fact that God knows us completely has to be kept in balance with a second great truth. God loves us through and through. Unconditionally. Nothing we can do can make God love us more and nothing we can do can make him love us less.

Last week Kate used the image of a tiny baby asleep in their parent's arms to illustrate the security and peace of being held and loved by God. Maybe that can help us grasp something of the unconditional love of God. Like the love shown by a mother or father towards a small child.

No matter what that child does, the love of the parent will always be there. As the child grows and develops the parent might not like everything the child does, but they will still love them. How much more God.

So back to the story that Jesus told - God looked on the Pharisee and the tax-collector and knew all about them, but he still loved them both through and through. He loved them for who they were – irrespective of what they did. He saw through the Pharisee's boasting, and he saw beyond the tax collector's confession.

But his unconditional love for them both meant that didn't mean he wanted them to stay as they were.

My guess is that he wanted the Pharisee to take a long hard look at himself and see that along with the positive things he mentioned in his so called prayer there was also hypocrisy and self justification. God wanted him to repent of those things and focus on God rather than himself.

And probably when God looked at the tax collector he would have received his cry for mercy but also wanted him to see the positive things about himself – his honesty in praying that prayer and his humility in seeing others as better than himself for example

So back to our question. How does God see us. And a follow-on question. What does he want us to change and how can that change come about?

He sees the truth about us – and we can only begin to know what that is by taking an honest and deep look at ourselves; stripping away all masks and pretensions. Even then it is perhaps difficult for us. But God sees that truth with love in his eyes. He loves us – each one of us – so much so that he wants us to move on, to grow and develop and thrive. He wants to help us become the very best we can be.

Not to become someone else. But to become the very best Paul, Kate, Margaret, or whoever that we can possibly be.

So how does that happen?

The apostle Paul is a good example here. In today's reading he makes bold claims about himself –

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness

But he recognises too that the person he is now is very different from the person he was before. And that change has been brought about by God.

He talks in his letters about God's unconditional love - think about the wonderful love poem in 1 Corinthians 13 based on his experience of that love. And he talks too of the transforming power of God's Spirit living within him, changing him into the person God wanted him to be. The two went together – the love of God brings about the transformation by God into the person he wanted Paul to be.

And the same is true for us. Because of God's love for us he seeks to transform us by his Spirit. All we have to do is accept his love and allow him to work with us as we grow into the person he wants us to be – the very best me that i can be; the very best you that you can be.

Like in many stories from the gospels we don't know what happened to either the Pharisee or the tax collector. Maybe they remained as they were – one thinking he was perfect already leaving God no room to work, the other thinking he was so far away from God that God would want nothing to do with him. But I would love to think they recognised God's amazing love for them and allowed him by his Spirit to help them grow into the people he wanted them to be.

And I would love to think as well that we will allow God to do the same with and for us.