

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 240

27th October 2024

Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Luke 18:9-14 ("The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector")

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." 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!" 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.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven (CH:160)

Who would true valour see (CH:535)

We turn to God when we are sorely pressed (CH:393)

To God be the glory (CH:512)

Here is a story based loosely on something which happened to a German spiritual writer many years ago. An old man and a younger man lived next door to each other, and had done so for as long as either could remember. In the case of the younger man, he hadn't known it any other way. As for the old man, he had reached that stage in life when sadly he just couldn't remember very much at all.

Many, many years ago, the old man had been much younger himself and had been very good to the little boy, teaching him how to fish for carp, how to play the mouth organ, how to pour a glass of beer so that it was "just right". This was a friendship which the younger man had valued very deeply, with lots and lots of good things to look back on over so many years gone by. So now in his middle age the younger man was devoted to his friend, as was the younger man's wife, with the pair of them visiting him with shopping, making his meals and regularly taking him out and about on adventures, just like the good old days.

On one of these adventures, the old man was in talkative mood - the kind of talk which could best be described as "talking to himself". At first the couple put up with the constant chat, but over the space of several hours in a shopping centre, it got to be really quite challenging. Nodding to his wife, the younger man went off to seek refuge in the Gents. He turned on the tap and splashed his face with water. As he reached for a paper towel he stared at his reflection in the mirror and declared: "Oh, thank you God that I am not like him ... talking to myself all the time."

At this, a man at the very next wash-hand basin slowly turned to look at him, while that wet-faced speaker at the mirror found himself at a point of harsh realisation: the one thing in life that he was thankful for not being was the very thing he was being, there and then. As the stranger rushed to get away without even drying his hands, the younger man was left to wonder what had just taken place.

The parable which he are looking at today tells a very similar story of someone who completely fails to grasp that the way he has become is the way he would probably never want to be. We are told that Jesus' listeners that day were folk who had a terrible contempt for others - people who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous" while all the time being far from that great goal of righteousness - and this on account of the way in which they viewed others. The parable is for them.

Through his story Jesus presents his listeners with two very different men: the first is a Pharisee: a person of great status and immense social standing within the Jewish faith. He would, no doubt, have been well-read and hugely able, wielding power, oozing authority. He would have been well-off. He would have moved in some pretty exclusive circles.

Meanwhile, the second man could hardly have been more different. He was a tax collector whose daily work involved him in taking lots of money from the oppressed people of Judea, channelling that cash on to the oppressor, Caesar. This would have set him at odds with his own Jewish people, who would probably have had a thing or two to say about the ways in which rich tax collectors routinely lined their own pockets at the expense of impoverished tax payers. Whether these people were hated on account of the brazen way in which they were habitually cosying up to Rome, or else on account of their common swindling of the ordinary man and woman in the street, one thing is certain: the tax collectors were hated.

And so we have our two characters there in the Jerusalem Temple, worshipping God in their rather different ways. So let's meet the Pharisee as he launches into a

wordy and erudite prayer to his heavenly Father:

God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.

Here is a man who is convinced beyond all reason that he is in the right, as he may well be. More than this, he is certain that "other people" are in the wrong. These are people - let's face it - like thieves, rogues, adulterers, "or even like this tax-collector" who are fit only for mockery in the great and holy Temple, the very house of God here on Earth. For the Pharisee, these are ghastly little people upon whom he looks down from quite some height of moral indignation.

And then Jesus completes his little tale by turning to the other man. Listen to this: *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!" 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.'* [Emphasis added]

This misguided Pharisee not only brings shame upon his religious calling, he shows himself to be a person who cares little or nothing for other people. He has achieved nothing but a diminishing of himself, not least in the eyes of the people in his neighbourhood - though perhaps not in his like-minded circle of friends.

But what of the tax-collector? In his simple yet heart-felt prayer this humble man mentions only one person: a person who openly recognises that he is standing in need of salvation - and that one, single person is none other than himself.

I once read that the Pharisee in this parable is someone living "in the hell of self-righteousness", and that strikes me as a very good description. In this life it is possible for people of faith to become certain in their own minds that they are believing the right thing, praying the right thing, doing the right thing. And so they come to see themselves as being right. Rightly right in every department, enabling them to complain and to conspire and to condemn those whose lives are so obviously much less than they could be or should be. And all the while, says Jesus, we are to turn our attention to two great things: the tax-collector who is so convinced of his own personal need of salvation and (by inference) the God of Grace whose forgiveness is totally unmerited ... yet open to all who are ready to receive that great holy, heavenly love which transforms all things.

"Jesus' verdict on these two men must have sounded outrageous." So says the South African Dominican theologian, Albert Nolan. "The sinner is pleasing to God and the virtuous man is not. Why? Because the sinner did not exalt himself and the virtuous man did. The Pharisee dared to regard himself as superior to men like the tax collector. ... This is not so much a matter of pride as an inability to share God's compassion for all. Without compassion all religious practices and beliefs are useless and empty. Without compassion all politics will be oppressive, even the politics of revolution. One of the basic causes of oppression, discrimination and suffering in that society was its religion. ... And nothing is more impervious to change than religious zeal. The piety and good works of the dutiful religious man made him feel that God was on his side. He did not need God's mercy and forgiveness; that was what others needed. The sinner, on the other hand, was well aware of his desperate need for mercy and forgiveness and of his need to change his life. ... Jesus soon discovered that it was the dutiful religious man, rather than the sinner or pagan Roman, who was an obstacle to the coming of the kingdom of total liberation. Amen.

Praying for others

Generous God,
to you we turn when we are sorely pressed to understand the troubles of the world,
a world so full of your bounty and goodness, ever blighted by selfishness and greed,
the human desire to dominate and control which underlies
the appalling suffering of humankind today.

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those caught up in the horrific conflict in the Middle East:
innocent men, women and children suffering beyond human endurance.

May they feel your presence, finding rest and relief in your protection.

We pray for all those whose hearts long for peace but who find themselves
armed and active, caught in the crossfire, bowed down
under the weight of terror, guilt and helplessness.

May they know your strength and receive your reassurance.

Only you, Lord, can fully understand the darkness of this hour,
the depth of suffering and the root of sin.

Shine your beacon of Truth and Hope, we pray,
to reveal a brighter tomorrow,

Through Jesus Christ, your Son, Light of the world. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Blythswood Shoebox Appeal due ... NOW!: The wrapped and filled shoeboxes for our annual appeal for Blythswood to send much-needed essentials to families in eastern Europe need to be in Church by this Sunday (27th) please.

Quiz Night: The annual Longniddry Christian Aid Quiz takes place on Friday, 15th November at 7.30pm in Longniddry Community Centre. Entry is £10 per person, payable on the night, for teams of between four and six people. To book a place, please speak to one of the Christian Aid team. If you don't have a team to join but would like to take part, don't miss out! Speak to the Christian Aid team and they will find you a team to join.

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 30th October for the next friendly gathering. All welcome!

New Age Kurling: Tuesdays from 2-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

Wednesday Club: From 2.30-4pm in Room 2, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy a variety of activities and tea/coffee. (Contact Janet: 07766 574123).

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from 10.30am - 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.