

## JUST AS I AM

### Sermon at the Eucharist on the Last Sunday after Trinity, with Holy Baptism

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

THE parable in this morning's Gospel reading is a familiar one, and the trouble with familiar stories is that we can easily listen to them without really taking them in. In the case of this story, we can easily picture the scene.

There's a pharisee. That's a word that carries a lot of negative connotations, so right from the start we are tempted to think of him as the villain of the piece. He is standing there in the temple, reminding God of all his religious activities – praying, fasting, almsgiving. And then there's a tax-collector. We know that tax-collectors were a despised group of people. We remember that Jesus often made friends with the tax-collectors, while he had hard things to say to the pharisees. And when Jesus says at the end of the parable that it is the tax-collector who went home 'justified', it's easy to think that we've got the point. God prefers the humble heart of the tax-collector to all the religious observances of the pharisee, which of course is a very comfortable conclusion. But that suggests we may be missing something because the parables of Jesus do not usually have a comfortable conclusion.

So let's look at these two characters again. First, the pharisee. Now we do have to get right out of our minds the idea that the word pharisee simply means a hypocrite. Jesus did sometimes call the pharisees hypocrites, but not always. The pharisees formed what we might call a religious order or society of people committed to the whole-hearted practice of their faith. So in this story, the pharisee, a man committed to the whole-hearted practice of his faith, goes to the temple to pray. Nothing wrong with that. Jesus didn't like people who prayed on street corners in an ostentatious way, but this pharisee is in the temple, the place for prayer. He's not at fault for praying in the temple, any more than the tax-collector is at fault for praying in the temple. The temple was a good place to pray.

Nor does Jesus criticize the pharisee for his other religious activities. The pharisee fasts twice a week. Jesus didn't criticize fasting; he commended it, though he didn't like people who paraded it in front of others. The pharisee gives away a tenth of his income. Jesus didn't criticize charitable giving; he commended it, though he didn't like people who made a song and dance about it, like some modern-day philanthropists. Generosity, he said, should be done in secret.

So far, there's no fault to find with the pharisee. He's not parading his religious activities in front of other people. (We are told specifically that he was 'standing on his own'.) He recounted his religious activities to no one but God. So what was the pharisee's problem? We are told that he 'despised others'. He couldn't help thinking to himself (and thanking God) that he was doing better than other people. He was certainly doing better than that tax-collector over there. So that's where it all went wrong. His problem was that in his own mind he set himself apart from other people. There was no peace between him and the tax-collector, as they both prayed in the same temple to the same God. There was no awareness that God loved the tax-collector as much as God loved the pharisee. There was pride in this pharisee's heart, and it cut him off from the tax-collector, his brother-in-God.

And what of the tax-collector? He's not *commended* for being a tax-collector. He's not *commended* for not having much religion. All we are told about his religion is that he came into the temple to say his prayers – just as the pharisee did. But whatever his religion or lack of it, it wasn't something he boasted about, even in the secrecy of his own heart before God. His prayer was simply, 'God be merciful to me a sinner', which is exactly what the pharisee's prayer should have been.

Jesus tells us at the end of the story that it was the tax-collector, rather than the pharisee, who went home *justified*. Now that's a word that the English translations struggle with. It goes back to the Greek word *diké* (δικη) which means 'justice'. It is sometimes translated as 'just' and sometimes as 'right'. We have both 'just' and 'right' in this passage, with the same Greek word behind them. The reading begins: 'Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous'. The word 'righteous' goes back to that Greek word *diké*. And at the end, Jesus says, 'this man went down to his home justified rather than the other'. And the word 'justified' goes back to that same Greek word. In other words, Jesus is topping and tailing the parable like this: 'Here is a story for those who trust in themselves that they are "right" with God. It was the tax-collector, not the pharisee, who went home "right" with God'. And he was 'right with God' because God accepted his humble heart.

There was nothing wrong with the pharisee except a secret pride, deep in his heart, known only to the God to whom all hearts are open. And there wasn't much right with the tax-collector, as far as we know, except a secret humility, deep in his heart, known only to the God to whom all hearts are open. The pharisee's pride meant that he trusted in himself, instead of God. The tax-collector's humility meant that he trusted in God, instead of in himself. And that made him right with God.

So there's our far-from-comfortable conclusion. The Lord doesn't let us off praying or fasting or almsgiving; he commends (and indeed commands) them all, but he warns us against that corrosive spiritual pride which separates us from one another and from God. At the end of all our religious observances we can only say, 'God be merciful to me a sinner'.

And what has this to do with baby Aurelia, whom we bring to God to be baptized today? Absolutely everything. Today God takes Aurelia for his own. God says to Aurelia, 'You are *right* with me' – 'You are right *with* me.' You are my child, my chosen one, my accepted one. Aurelia will contribute nothing to that, except perhaps a yell of indignation when she realizes that something unfamiliar is about to happen.

A new-born child can do nothing but receive, which is the way we all are before God. St Luke brings this home to us powerfully in the very next passage after this morning's gospel reading, when he tells of people bringing small children to Jesus, and of Jesus saying to his disciples, 'Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it'. The tax-collector received the kingdom of God as a little child, because he had nothing to bring to God. The pharisee did *not* receive the kingdom of God as a little child, because he thought of his religious observances as something that earned him a place in the kingdom. But at the end of our religious observances we can only say, 'God be merciful to me a sinner'. As we sang at the start of this service:

*Just as I am*, without one plea  
but that thy blood was shed for me,  
and that thou bidd'st me come to thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come.

*Just as I am*, thou wilt receive,  
wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve:  
because thy promise I believe,  
O Lamb of God, I come.

*Just as I am* (thy love unknown  
has broken every barrier down),  
now to be thine, year thine alone,  
O Lamb of God, I come.

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