

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 30 Year C 2022

One of the rather helpful and in fact striking techniques the evangelist Luke employs in the telling of his gospel is to set two figures, or two groups of figures, in opposition. He is not unique in this. Saint Matthew, for instance, sets up Herod as opposed to Joseph in his infant narrative. And in John's Gospel, the archetypal contrast is set up between Pilate and Jesus in his Passion Narrative. But for Luke, though, there is (we may say) a more consistent use of this technique. And it is employed throughout his gospel.

The section of Luke's Gospel we currently find ourselves in is part of a lengthy portion of material unique to this gospel. As part of this unique material, we have been hearing a fair bit of these contrasting figures over the last few weeks. We see it in the Prodigal Son and his brother. The 10 lepers with only one returning to give thanks. The widow and the unjust judge. And we hear it today in the contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector. This play of contrasts is not just a neat literary device. It highlights how in the life of faith and in our relationship with God there are choices to be made, there are options we must side with. It would appear, then, that a consistent feature of Jesus' teaching is that there are two ways without any middle ground. We are provoked and challenged to decision. This of course echoes what Jesus says in Matthew's gospel: *Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

Now, on the one hand, the Pharisees were generally admired, and so they should have been. Their stress on obedience to the Law was the obvious response to the story of the Old Testament. Judgement had come with exile and the destruction of the Temple, because of lack of obedience. The Pharisees emerge as a 'holiness movement' really to say, *we've noticed what you're saying to us God, we've learned our lesson.*

But here is the paradox, or perhaps the tension. Though elsewhere Jesus has some harsh words for the Pharisees, he also says that we should follow their teachings, to *not* neglect the details, and that our 'righteousness' (that is, our observance of these things) should exceed theirs! And we would want to agree with the Pharisee in today's story, and say yes, *it is* a good thing he is not an extortioner, or unjust, or an adulterer. Surely we should aim for the same thing!

So, the lesson of this parable cannot be, *'Don't engage in the practices that the Pharisees practice'*. All that to say, the story steps itself up for another typical Jesus 'trick': to invert our usual expectations. The point is made by turning things on their head. So here, the person to whom *we ought to* look as a role model actually has the wrong attitude. If we read this story already knowing that the pharisee was the 'baddie' then the whole point is lost, and the parable just confirms our prejudice.

Against this is the figure of the tax collector. It is reasonably well-known why tax-collectors were despised. On the one hand, the role was awarded on the basis of an auction, so whoever claimed to be able to raise the most taxes was awarded the franchise. This meant that tax-collectors were seen as exploitative, taking more than was strictly necessary. On the other hand, there was an important theological issue at stake. Tax-collectors were colluding with the very power from which pious Jews sought God for liberation.

When referring to the Pharisee, most of the space is given over to describe his prayer. But to highlight the contrast, when referring to the tax collector most of the space is given over to describe his posture: he stands far off, he will not lift his eyes to heaven and he beats his chest in repentance. For the Pharisee, what matters is his own words and actions; for the tax-collector, what matters is his attitude towards God. It is this attitude of humility and repentance which justifies, in other words, reckons us right (or just) with God. The externals of faith are important. But they are not a substitute for the attitude of the heart.

It is curious, then, that there are some sectors in the church today who are nervous about the idea of there being a choice, of there being a clear, definitive way that leads to life and one that doesn't. There is a growing trend in some parts to speak about 'comprehensive Anglicanism'. I am sure there are some good motives behind it. This 'comprehensive' approach seeks to make the church more open, attractive and appealing. We don't want to build walls between people. We want to be open and inclusive. And of course, there is truth in that. The gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone. No one is excluded from receiving the life and grace offered to us by faith in him. But at the same time, the gospel does make exclusive claims. Jesus is The Way, the truth and the life. But what is really meant by 'comprehensive' is 'accommodation', and that exacting demands cannot be made because they risk excluding and offending.

We ought to steer away from truth claims in order to be tolerant. No hard lines can be asserted really about anything. But this really is just the latest iteration of something as old as the church. There has always been a tension between accommodation and identity, between relevance and truth. And all the classic heresies in one or another are the story of trying to make the faith just a bit easier and more palatable. But if there are no exclusive claims for Jesus and the gospel, well then there really is no point in either believing or belonging. ‘Accommodation’ is really a grave missional misstep.

Before Christians were known as Christians they were known as members of The Way. The earliest non-biblical surviving Christian text we have, *The Didache* likewise talks about The Way. Indeed, it opens with this very assertion: *There are two ways, one of life and one of death; but a great difference between the two ways.* There is a choice, and endless accommodation to the whims and trends of the age, a whittling down of Christian faith and practice to a bare minimum, does not bear authentic witness to radical and complete change – indeed choice – offered us in the gospel.

Now, choosing the way of life, choosing Christ, does not bestow on us a certain superiority. And in this, the gospel illustration is most helpful. Choosing Christ and his way of life means we recognise our wretchedness, that there is nothing we possess to lord over anyone. And for those of us who seek to maintain orthodox faith and practice, it is not just a case of towing the party line. Attitude matters. Importantly, the parable reminds us that when our attitude to God (and to spiritual practices and disciplines) is wrong, then our attitude to others is corrupted. But also importantly, the right attitude is not a free ticket. If the tax-collector is sincere in his repentance, then it will in fact cost him dear, as the story about Zacchaeus in the next chapter sets out. For the Pharisee, on the other hand, his prayer costs him nothing.

It is not that the Pharisee is mistaken in his devotional practices. And nor is it the case that the tax-collector is right to do nothing other than throw himself on the mercy of God (despite this being quite a common reading!) The opening line of this story reminds us that the issue Jesus is focusing on is the attitude to such practices. Good practices are worth nothing without the right attitude. And here, it is the attitude of humility and repentance that counts. An attitude that moves us to accept the full cost of saying ‘yes’ to the Way of Life. Amen.