

Anglican-Lutheran Society

Annual General Meeting, 25th February 2016

Sermon preached by The Very Rev Dr John Arnold (Anglican President of the Society)

The Pharisee and the Publican

Romans 8, 18-30; Luke 18, 9-14

We all know the story of the Sunday School teacher who ended her lesson on this parable by saying: "Now let us put our hands together and close our eyes and thank God that we are not like the Pharisee." I just mention it in passing in case anyone should be disappointed if I left it out.

Now listen to another voice: 'Lara was not religious...she did not believe in ritual.' That's not me; it is Boris Pasternak in his masterpiece *Doctor Zhivago*. 'Lara was not religious; but sometimes, to enable her to bear her life, she needed the accompaniment of an inward music and she could not always compose it for herself. That music was God's word of life and it was to weep over it that she went to church...In the time it took her ...to find her place the deacon had rattled off the beatitudes at a pace suggesting that they were quite well enough known without his help. "Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are they that mourn...Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness..." Lara trembled and stood still. This was for her. He was saying: "Happy are the downtrodden. There is after all something to be said for them. They have everything before them." That was what Christ thought. That was His opinion.' '

That's magical, isn't it? Only a poet could have written that to express what can happen in cathedrals and other open churches, where wounded souls can slip in, feeling like death, and hide behind pillars and be touched by God's word of life and be broken down and lifted up in one and the same movement and know that they count, that they are a child of God, worth more than any sparrow.

This is what God's grace could do for the teenaged mistress of a middle aged roué; and it is what it could have done for the Pharisee in the Temple, only God's word of life was drowned out by his own monologue and he went away empty. He isn't a bad man; in fact, he is a good man, one of a group of exceptionally good Jews who kept the Law and believed in the resurrection. Paul was one and Jesus was closer to them than used to be thought. He stands in the Court of the Temple, a place of prayer rather than of sacrifice; and that is important because sacrifice is an attempt to ingratiate oneself with God, while prayer is an expression of dependence upon God. He prays aloud, as was usual, beginning well, "God, I thank you."

But he is talking to himself, intending to be overheard by others. We do not need to question his list of good works; they are admirable and they include, presumably, tithing anise and cumin, only he overlooks the weightier matters of the Law, justice, mercy and truth, because his gaze has slipped from God to neighbour and not in the good way that Jesus taught. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even as this tax collector." By a strange irony, in making comparisons and claiming not to be like other people, he shows that he *is* just like other people, turned in on himself, *incurvatus in se*, a sinner.

Chief of sinners, though, in public estimation were tax collectors, who were not amiable, bowler-hatted Hectors from Inland Revenue but brutal and corrupt enforcers and *mafiosi*, farming taxes for the hated Romans. We ought not to romanticise them, any more than we should Samaritans. We may assume that this one, like his fellows, is a scoundrel, who makes a living, like many of the unofficial co-operators with the Stasi in former East Germany, as a collaborator with an occupying power, betraying, deceiving, impoverishing and humiliating others. Society does not need him or those who are like him; it would be better off without them.

On the other hand, society does need people like the Pharisee, reliable, hardworking and honest; it could not function without them. But it is a long way from a society functioning efficiently at the level of probity to a fellowship or community interacting at the level of love. That is what Jesus is saying here. He wants us to be clinical rather than juridical, to look with the eyes of a doctor rather than of a judge, to shift, as has been said, from the Old Bailey to the London Hospital, just round the corner from here, to diagnose sinful actions as symptoms rather than as the disease itself.

This man, like Lara, is sick at heart, and he needs healing more than punishment, for his is the sickness unto death, lack of love and of compassion, cutting himself off from God by cutting himself off from his neighbour, the man next to him now, "even this tax collector." He has eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; and he tries to escape the human condition by rising above it, looking down, despising, seeing what is wrong with everyone else; but in claiming implicitly to see, he only shows how blind he is, so obsessed with the specks in the other man's eye that he fails to notice the plank in his own. He thinks God needs him; the tax collector knows that he needs God; that is the difference.

It is easy to bandy around the charge of hypocrisy. We take for granted that there is a difference between the outward piety and respectability of the Pharisee and his inner self-obsession and sinfulness, and we are accustomed to the idea that there are hidden levels and layers of personality, deeper down than outward appearances. But the different layers or levels of personality can work

the other way round, too. Beneath the evident degradation and despair of Lara is a child of God, looking for love, only at first in the wrong place; beneath the outer wickedness and anti-social behaviour of the tax collector is a little boy looking, like Tony Soprano, for acceptance; and he is looking in the right place, in the Court of the Lord 'who desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live.'

If we want to see how he might develop beyond the parameters of this parable, we should look at the story of Zacchaeus in the next chapter of Luke's Gospel; but that, as they say, is another story. Incidentally, when *he* makes his fine public speech about how much he is going to give back, he is in danger of turning into, or back into, a Pharisee and having to start all over again; and, if we want a prequel as well as a sequel, we should note that Jesus already had, in the call of Levi, a living example of a repentant tax collector.

In the parable itself, though, we do not see this tax collector as yet doing 'the good works that God has prepared for him to walk in'. We see him only as a sinner; but now he is a justified sinner. That is to say, he is in a right relationship with God and his neighbour, not by bargaining or by payment or by good deeds, but simply by responding to grace with faith that God will indeed be merciful to him, a sinner. Right behaviour can follow from that, not the other way round. This short, short story, only 87 words in Greek, is the basis for the notion that we are at one and the same time righteous and sinful – *simul justus et peccator* – an idea, which, if taken lightly, can lead to a kind of a-moralism, as Luther's adversaries were not slow to point out, and to the belief that you can 'sin you way to heaven'. That is what DH Lawrence accused Dostoyevsky of teaching. It goes without saying that that was not what either Dostoyevsky or Luther meant. The clue is that Dostoyevsky (followed in this instance by Pasternak) set out his ideas of sin and salvation by embodying them as characters in stories: and that is exactly what Jesus does here.

The Pharisee and the tax collector are not two individuals in the life of Jesus, like Levi or Zacchaeus. They are characters in a story *by* Jesus. They are twin figments of a single, creative imagination; and we should think of them not as two different people but as two aspects of one person, of humankind, of ourselves. The Pharisee with his struggle to lead a good life, the tax collector with his sinfulness and need for God, these two souls inhabit *my* breast, as Goethe's Faust says: "*Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in meiner Brust*". The ground of my hope is that they are both held in a single vision, in judgment and in mercy, in the mind of Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith.

It is at this point that we see the futility of thanking God that we are not like the Sunday School teacher who thanked God that she was not like the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not like

the tax collector. The recognition of our common humanity and incorporation into Christ saves us from becoming characters in this moral and spiritual shaggy dog story; and we come to Communion, not trusting in our own righteousness, not to thank God for making us different but for making us all and for sending Jesus Christ to be one of us, to die upon the Cross for our redemption and to unite us with each other and with Him, to whom be all praise and glory, now and forever. Amen.