

**2019-10-27 Sue Diggory**  
**Last after Trinity**

**Luke 18 v 9 – 14**  
**The Pharisee and The Tax Collector**

***The Right Attitude Before God***

When tidying away after a recent visit by our granddaughter I gathered up and put away a whole stack of Mr Men books. I wonder how familiar you are with their stories; we read them to and with our children and they are now favourites with our grandchildren. For each of them their name sums up their character and who they really are; Mr Happy is always smiling, Mr Greedy has a rather large tummy and poor old Mr Bump is swathed in bandages as he is always bumping into things. Simple names, but names that as I say really paint a picture.

Last week we thought about the need to be resilient in our praying, to keep at it and not give up. Today we have another story about prayer, a story that looks a bit more at the 'how to do it' and the 'how not to do it;' a story that looks at the image we should be painting of ourselves as we pray.

So as I was reflecting on today's reading, it occurred to me that we could very easily substitute two Mr Men names for the main characters in our Gospel story today. So let me introduce you to Mr Proud and Mr Sorry.

*Two men went to the Temple to pray, Mr Proud, the Pharisee and Mr Sorry, the Tax Collector ...*

Let's look at what happened in the Temple and what lessons about prayer we can learn from it.

The Pharisee stood up and prayed and prayed about himself and we know from what he said he was a very devout man who thought he did everything that was needed to please God. He fasted twice a week; more than was needed as the law only required fasting on the Day of Atonement once a year, and he gave a tenth or a tithe of everything he had to the Temple not just tenth or what he earned, he gave a tenth of all his wealth. He more than followed he rules!

Surely he was doing everything right;  
surely he had the right attitude towards God?

However as we will see later he really had got the wrong end of the stick!

But we are told the tax collector stood at a distance, didn't even look up and simply said God have mercy on me a sinner.

And Jesus said *"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."*

Let's have a closer look at these two men – although Pharisees weren't always very popular in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, they weren't despised in the way tax collectors were. Tax collectors aren't too popular today but they certainly aren't looked on as traitors – unsavoury leeches on society, as one of my books put it, those who worked for the Romans; and certainly not the type of people you would want to sit next to at a dinner party, unless of course you are Jesus, because as we know he spent a lot of time with 'sinners' exactly the type of people that the Pharisee was keen to tell God he was pleased he wasn't like *"God I thank you that I am not like other people – thieves, rogues, adulterers – or even like this tax collector"*

So why did the Tax Collector and not the Pharisee go home justified by God?

There is a clue right at the start of our reading where Luke says Jesus told this parable *"to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt"* or as the modern Message translation puts it *"looked down their noses at the common people"* Jesus told this parable.

The Pharisee thought he had everything sorted; he knew the rules and obeyed them, in fact as we have seen he went further than was required, his prayer was truthful but he was totally unaware that he needed God. It was his pride in keeping the law, his pride in doing things the right way that was his undoing and led him down the path of self righteousness. His motivation was all wrong!

On the other hand the Tax Collector didn't even feel able to look up towards God, he didn't have any good works to try and impress God with, all he could do was look down beat his breast, and ask for mercy. He was prepared to leave it in God's hands. Interestingly the word used here for *mercy* in the Greek text is the same as the word used for propitiation or atonement – the work of Christ on the cross, the tax collector was asking God to have mercy and take his sin and deal with it because he knew only God was able to do it – he wasn't worthy because and as we hear week by week in the words of the Prayer Book Communion service it is Christ who is the propitiation for our sins.

He may not have been a man of great faith, he certainly wasn't a man who kept the law, but he was a man that knew his need of God, and God had compassion on him and gave him far more than he asked for because *"he went home justified before God"*

So what does this mean for us? The final verse of our reading says *“For all who exalts themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

The prophet Micah writing 700 years before the birth of Christ wrote “and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”

Its all about attitude – our attitude towards God, its not about what we do or how we do it – its about what motivates us – its about the why behind what we do, and not about what we actually do

We need to be humble enough to know we need God’s mercy;  
And we need to be humble enough to know that we don’t deserve God’s mercy but that because of his love for us, and his compassion for us if we are prepared like the tax collector to be honest before God and come knowing our need of him we will like him receive more than we ask for.

But it’s also like the tax collector being prepared to leave things in God’s hands to deal with in his way. Jurgen Moltman the German theologian said this

God condemns the good person who I want to be, but am not  
And accepts the bad person who I do not want to be, but am

– the Pharisee thought he was a very good person, but he wasn’t in God’s eyes because he was proud and self-righteous – he had the wrong attitude

– the tax collector knew he was a bad person, a sinful person and because of that he was accepted by God – he had the right attitude

Here at Holy Trinity as look out into our local community; I wonder what we see; do we see people who have life sorted on their terms or do we see people in need or do we see both? Do we see people who God loves and is longing to draw further into his kingdom; and do we feel his compassion and long to reach out with his love?

And perhaps even more importantly I wonder what people see when they look into our church community? Do they see people who think they have every thing under control or do they see people who know their need of God, do they see people who know that they don’t deserve God’s love, but like the Tax Collector are justified because they are prepared to say “God have mercy on me a sinner.” Do they see in us people who have the right attitude before God? Do they see in the words of the Mr Men, more people who are like Mr Sorry or more people who are like Mr Proud.

We know it was only Mr Sorry, the Tax Collector who pleased God. He knew he'd done wrong and wanted to change, but Mr Proud, the Pharisee thought he didn't need God at all."

If I'm honest some days I'm more like Mr Proud than Mr Sorry, some days I feel a bit too good about my self and what 'I have done for God' rather than feeling in awe of how much God has done and is doing for me.

Perhaps the question I need to be brave enough to ask myself is which Mr Man I am being as I stand here today?

Amen.