

Year C Proper 25

Luke 18:9-14

The Anglican Book of Common Prayer contains the following Prayer of Confession for use at Matins and Evensong.

“ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father;
We have erred, and strayed from thy ways
like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and
desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against thy holy laws.
We have left undone those things which we
ought to have done;
And we have done those things which we
ought not to have done;
And there is no health in us.
But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
miserable offenders.
Spare thou them, O God, which confess their
faults.

Restore thou them that are penitent;
According to thy promises declared unto
mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And grant, O most merciful Father, for his
sake; That we may hereafter live a godly,
righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy
holy Name. Amen.”

It is often said that confession is good for the
soul. We don't follow the Roman Catholic or
High Church tradition of confessing sins to a
priest, who has the authority on behalf of
Christ, to grant absolution for sins. But we
do always include a prayer of contrition and
confession in our public prayers of worship.
It could be argued that whilst these
communal prayers are important and
helpful, they are insufficient when compared

to the stark reality of the confessional. After all, it is easy to hide behind the ritual of public worship but not so easy when confronted one to one. Nevertheless, regardless of the tradition followed, confession should have its place across the spectrum of Christian faith and practice.

It has been said that parables are like fishing lines, full of attractive features - feathers, bright colours - and they end with a sharp little barb.¹ This parable is no different. A word about the Pharisee and the tax collector presented to us in Luke's parable before we

¹ Bartlett 2010 *Feasting on the Word Year C Volume 4* Westminster William Knox Press p.213

go any further. The Pharisees were a Jewish sect in first century Palestine who were renowned for their liberal tendencies. The word 'Pharisee' has come into contemporary English to denote someone who has pretensions to superior sanctity and of course the parable before us today backs that up. But the Pharisees were not the religious conservatives of their age. They were the progressives; the ones who challenged the temple authorities and who were keen to move religious power away from the temple in Jerusalem to the synagogues that were found throughout Israel. In that

sense, they presented themselves as representatives of the people. Of course, Jesus took a contrary view. The tax collector, on the other hand, would have been viewed by the man on the street very differently. Inland Revenue employees may not be the most popular people today but that was nothing compared to tax collectors at the time of Jesus. You see, tax collectors were employed by the Roman authorities and they were given free reign to get on with their work and to make the most of their privilege. They would take more than what they should have and after the Romans were paid, they

would pocket the rest. This made them very unpopular. They were considered to be the lowest of the low: a Jew who was willing to openly steal from his fellow Jew was beyond contempt. That, of course, is the background context to the story of Zacchaeus that we'll be looking at next week. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector in our parable today offer their confession in the temple. The confessions are very different. In classic Lukan fashion, the confession of the religiously upright man is rejected whilst the confession of the cheating rogue is accepted. Firstly let us think about

the Pharisee. He is full of himself and his own righteousness. He is self-satisfied and smug. But he makes us all feel very uncomfortable because self-satisfied smugness is part of human nature and we're all human. If we were to seek the opinion of a good number of non church goers today, I'm sure that many of them would say that they would not be found in church because of the smugness of those who occupy the pews. We bristle against that kind of verdict but that's maybe because it's true. The truth hurts after all. The chief sin of the religious person is pride. And pride is so dangerous

because it is idolatrous. It places the merits of the individual above the mercy and grace of God.

On the evening of July 20, 1969, people across the world were huddled around black and white TV sets, breathless as they watched a grainy image. Those who didn't have TV sets had gone to the homes of neighbours who did. No one wanted to miss what was being shown on the screen. The air was thick with excitement and nervous tension. Then at four minutes to eleven a white suited Neil Armstrong stepped from his spacecraft onto the surface of the moon,

uttering the immortal words, “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Getting to the moon was a phenomenal achievement. It signalled hope that we humans could achieve great things. But from another perspective it signalled the very worst about us. Eight years before Armstrong stepped on the moon the Russians put Gagarin into a spaceship and launched him into orbit around the earth, the first ever manned space flight. That moment shamed the people of the United States. It was the time of the Cold War and

once Gagarin went into space the US was hell bent on beating the Russians to the moon. They redoubled their efforts, the space program became a national priority.

Why? What was so important about being first to the moon? The race to the moon was a race for bragging rights. It was a competition to show which nation had the greatest know-how, which system – Capitalism or Communism – the most advanced technology, the cleverer scientists.

A report to the House Subcommittee on Manned Space Flight of the Committee on Science and Astronautics in 1974 stated that

the Apollo moon program cost \$25.4 billion, which equates to over \$100 billion in today's (2012) values. Christian rock singer Larry Norman observed in his song the Great American Novel that this occurred at a time when the US and the world were filled with hungry people.² Corporate and individual pride: where is the mercy and grace of God? There may be a tendency in us all to bury the issue of pride and we can try to do that by self-justification. After all what's wrong with fasting and tithing and at least I'm not wasting my life on trivialities, like so many

² <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/pride/>

others. And then we have to face a parable like this.

So what about the tax collector? His confession is not like Uriah Heep in David Copperfield who is 'so umble'. Here is a genuine, contrite expression of guilt and an appeal to the mercy of God. Here was a man who had much to be forgiven and therefore understood the quality of the forgiveness that was being offered. Notice that Jesus used the word 'justified' to describe the outcome of the tax collector's confession. The word means 'to be set right': 'to be declared to be in the right'. The tax collector

is granted permission to go home and to leave all of his regrets behind. They no longer stick to him. He is freed from them.

Tomas Borge was a leader in the struggle against the totalitarian regime that had dominated his country, Nicaragua. During the revolution, Borge was captured and put in prison. While there he was subjected to the most extreme torture for over 500 hours.

After the revolution Borge was freed and become the Minister of the Interior. One day he found one of his torturers in jail. He walked up to this man who had inflicted such terrible, relentless and brutal pain

upon him and said, “I am going to get my revenge from you”. He then held out his hand and said, “This is my revenge, I forgive you.”³

The Pharisee’s measuring stick was himself. The tax collector’s measuring stick was God. The Pharisee measured up very well by his own achievements. The tax collector was pitifully exposed by the holiness of God. The Pharisee was living a charade. The tax collector was set free to live in the light of God’s mercy. That’s what we all desire and if

³ Cardenal, Ernesto, *The National Catholic Reporter*, September 17, 1979

we are honest to God that's what we will
find.