**23rd October 2022 Luke 18: 9-14**

**9**He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: **10**“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11**The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **12**I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ **13**But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ **14**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.”

In this parable, Jesus sets his story, as a lesson to his listeners, about two men who went up to the temple to pray. In many respects, the two men were as different as night and day in their approach to prayer with God.

To say the two men were as different as night and day in their approaches to God is not surprising, as there is no one way for people to pray. But in what way were they different? One was a Tax collector and the other was a Pharisee.

This parable is aimed at those who think they are very righteous and look down on others – that is, the Pharisees who considered themselves elitists. As was the custom, Jews were expected to pray three times a day, and people would go to the temple for private prayer. The Pharisee was part of the religious leadership, and in the eyes of society, the righteous leaders who fasted and tithed were more likely to be bound toward heaven than the grasping, unjust, and in society’s opinion, deplorable tax collectors.

The Tax collectors of the time were people who contracted to Rome to collect taxes from the Jewish inhabitants. These entrepreneurs, some of whom were Jewish, paid a stipulated amount of money to the empire in advance, giving them the right to collect taxes. These collectors squeezed as much as possible from the people, enough to cover their initial investment, and then to turn a profit. They in turn hired local Jews to physically collect the taxes. So, these underlings, together with their superiors, were despised because of their collusion with the occupying Roman empire. They were seen as traitors to their compatriots for a profit. Not surprisingly, graft, theft, and corruption, resulting in wealth, abounded among them. Furthermore, Jewish tax collectors were seen as unclean because of their contact with the Gentiles. No self-respecting Jew would eat, let alone associate with these people whom they perceived as the scum of the earth.

So, the question Jesus raised was, did the Pharisee really go to pray, or to remind God what a good citizen he was?

On the other hand, the Tax Collector stood far off and would not even lift his eyes to God. This reading does not even do justice to his humility, for he prayed “O God, be merciful to me – the sinner, as if he was not merely a sinner, but sinner par-excellence. And in the view of Jesus, it was that heart-broken, self-despising prayer which won him acceptance before God. He was acknowledging the conflict between how he should be behaving, and how he actually was behaving towards his fellow jews.

So, what is the meaning of the parable in Luke 18:9-14? The difference between the two men’s approaches is not so much about their positioning in society, or the words they spoke, but simply what the words said about what was in their heart, their attitudes towards God, and to other people. It appears that Jesus wanted to teach people the importance of praying with the right attitude. It was important to be humble before God, recognise our deficiencies and need, and, hand ourselves over to the mercy of God to enter God’s kingdom.

So, Jesus wanted to teach people the importance of **praying with the right attitude**. This parable is aimed at those who think they are very righteous and look down on others – that is, the Pharisees. Here is a man who despises his fellow people. The key point here is that anyone who lifts him or herself up before God will be brought down, while anyone who is humbles him or herself, will be lifted up. In prayer we are not supposed to lift ourselves above our fellow people. We are just simply one of many guilty of sinning; a suffering, sorrowful humanity, all kneeling before God. Often, our pride is such that admission of human weakness and failure is something we would rather keep to ourselves, a sort of taboo in our society. It is not cool to admit our weaknesses and failures, or that that we need help. What a waste of time. God knows this anyway. He is just waiting for us to acknowledge our weaknesses and failures to him. This kind of admission gets the attention of God though, and it’s God’s attention that we need and want. As parents we can understand that. Our children will mess up and may disappoint us with their behaviour at times.

But what we need is their self-acknowledgement that they have messed up. We can then all move forward in our love for them, just as God helps us move forward with his love for us. Jesus, who knows the heart and mind of God no doubt shocked his audience. They were sure that the Pharisee was the one who would win the approval of God, but Jesus told them that this other man, the sinner went home justified, rather than the Pharisee.

The lesson here is that God accepts the humble and needy, not the proud and disdainful. We know that God accepts this because God accepts us, loves, and forgives us because of our faith and humility.

Amen.