

Being humble before God

27/10/2013

Reading: Luke 18: 9-14 (Jesus' story about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector)

We've got to be quite careful with this reading. We like to see stuck-up people brought down, don't we! We're always on the side of the underdog, so we're all for Jesus ripping into the complacent and the arrogant. But, hang on, Jesus isn't getting at the rich and famous, the gin and Jag set of his day, the film stars and the snobs we want to see brought down. Jesus is talking to the religious people of his day, the church people of today - us. There should be an "ouch" about this passage when we read it, because we can all be Pharisees at times. They are confident in their own righteousness, and surely we should be confident because we have said yes to God and have accepted his salvation; that's why we're in church, surely. We should also be people of integrity, like the Pharisee, not greedy, dishonest or adulterers. We are also, I hope, faithful in our Christian faith, and we contribute to our church and to charity, just as the Pharisee is faithful to his Jewish faith and with his wallet. And yet Jesus says to the Pharisee and to us if we are like him: "You can do all that and sicken me!"

"But wait a minute," we may say, "we are decent people here. We believe in morals and we uphold them. It's a pity other people don't seem to care about morals today. You only have to read the newspapers to be disgusted by what people get up to in the way of swindling others, sexual shenanigans and plain dirt. We don't do any of that here; we follow the Bible, we stick up for God. Thank God the dirt doesn't seem to have got into this church like everywhere else. Mind you, you can't get complacent!"

We've got to keep some standards in here, some purity, otherwise everything will go down the drain. And we're determined to keep this church on the right path.

“At least we can expect God to be on our side. Look at me: I've been coming here for years, helping out in all sorts of different ways - keeping the place running, really. I don't know what they'd do without people like us; we're the backbone of the church. And it's the financial giving of several of us that keeps this place open; we do our giving by Direct Debit, and we Gift Aid!”

That person brings an awful lot to God; he's very confident in what he does for God. He's trusting in his own righteousness, the Bible says. And Jesus says he's missed the boat completely; this “righteous” or self-righteous person won't be right with God (and Jesus deliberately uses the same word at the beginning and end of the passage).

Contrast that with this next person, today's equivalent of the Tax Collector: “God, if you're there, I've got nothing to cling to, nothing I can try to impress you with. I've ripped people off and I realise that that was wrong. But everybody does it in my line of business; and we thought we had to do it to make ends meet. I don't know how I'm going to get by in the future, but I come to you and ask you to forgive me. And I will change, I promise. I'm desperate, God, I need you. I've got nothing else, nobody else. there's no reason why you should care about me; I'm a nobody, and I've got history. But please look at me, please....”

God doesn't want us to grovel! Yes, He wants us to be humble, but not to grovel. There's all the difference between being confident in ourselves and being confident in Him. Being confident in Him should keep us humble. And Jesus says, “For everyone who exalts himself will be

humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”
That doesn’t mean that God’s in the business of turning things upside down, of just inverting things, for the sake of it. No. But it does mean He is in the business of humbling the proud, and He will do so, in this life or the next. And He is also in the business of lifting up the humble. But that isn’t to make them rich and cocky in their turn, but simply confident in God’s love, able to lift up our heads and straighten our backs, because we know ourselves to be God’s children and loved by Him.

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