

SERMON – 30th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR.

There are many Gospel stories or parables that Jesus told that remain with us from the very first moment we heard them, the parables of the prodigal son or the Good Samaritan especially, and also, at least for me, the one we have just heard, that of the Pharisee and the Publican. It is very easy to visualise the story Jesus tells, of one man standing so proudly and confidently before God in the temple, and the other skulking in nervous and shameful. It is off course all to do with prayer, just like last weeks Gospel of the parable of the unjust judge and the widow, with the widow persevering in her demands, telling us in our turn to be constant in our prayers. But this parable today takes the message a bit deeper, telling us how to pray, what we should be doing in our prayers and also reminds us what exactly prayer is, what it is about.

The story Jesus uses to instruct us on prayer is very visual and dramatic, the two men are directly opposite to one another, one a Pharisee, dressed in the holiest of clothing, a man noted for his holiness and religious observance, the other an accursed publican or tax –collector, a collaborator with the occupying Roman Army, they couldn't have been more different. It would have surprised the people who first heard it, after all the Pharisees were supposed to be the holy ones, and tax collectors certainly were not the holy ones, and yet it is the tax collectors prayer which is acceptable to God. So why was the Pharisees prayer not accepted by God, well the Pharisees were often criticised by Jesus, often accused of hypocrisy, often accused of only being concerned with the outward practice of religion, only concerned with appearances. This is clear in the prayer the Pharisee uses in the parable, in that actually it is not a prayer, he just congratulates himself, tells himself how wonderful he is, and how much better he is than the tax-collector and everybody else. His prayer is just a sham, it is just about pride and self congratulation, about how good he thinks he is, because of all the good things he has done, because of all the laws he has obeyed, and how he is so much better than everyone else.

The tax collectors prayer on the other hand is at least honest, yes he is a terrible sinner, perhaps stolen a great deal of money from people, led a life dominated by greed, and the desire for wealth, but he is humble before God, not proud, he doesn't condemn anyone else in his prayer, he doesn't think about anyone else in his prayer, he is solely concerned with God, he just asks for forgiveness, he is honest and humble before God. So his prayer is accepted because it is about God, aimed at God, humble before God, the Pharisees prayer was not accepted because it wasn't about God, it was just about the Pharisee congratulating himself. This is clear in the introduction to the parable, that Jesus directed this parable at those who rejoiced in their own holiness and despised everyone else

In listening to the parable we might be tempted to be a little bit smug, and join in the condemnation of the Pharisee, so say that we would never be like that, we would never be so proud and judgmental in our prayers. But, the parable is teaching us to be honest, and of course, we, I, are so often like that, so often we are far more concerned with what others are doing rather than what we should be doing- we look to the sins others commit, far more easily than looking at what sins we commit - every one of us here including me is very capable of being the hypocrite, even in prayer we can be hypocrites. The tax –collector was a terrible sinner, but he was honest and humble before God, he hid nothing from God, he was straightforward and humble before his God. Praying like this is not easy, being so honest and brutal with ourselves, admitting what sinners we are, and yet there is

that tremendous consolation, that if we are God looks past our sins, even terrible sinners and we are set right again with him.

Many people tell me that they find prayer difficult, I find it difficult, but today's parable reminds us that if prayer is about being honest and humble before God then it is bound to be hard-but in prayer that is all we have to do, not to try to earn God's favour, not to try to do lots of things like the Pharisee did, not even to say lots of prayers, just to be honest and to join with the tax-collector in saying, Lord be merciful to me a sinner- and then we will be at rights with God.