

**“God be merciful to me a sinner.” (St. Luke 18.13)**

If, perchance, you follow the morning and evening prayer lessons from the prayer book through the week, you will know that we have been working our way through the story of King David this summer, and have this past week been talking about his son, King Solomon. Solomon was David’s son through Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Towards the end of his life, David was subjected to multiple succession crises, with his sons Absalom and Adonijah contesting the throne. Eventually, though, it was Solomon who became the new king due to a promise David made to Bathsheba years prior.

The final narratives of the life of King David have to do with the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem, with King David collecting all the materials and riches to build the temple, but being told by God that it is not him, but his son, Solomon, who is actually to build it. But before Solomon builds the temple, before he is to do this magnificent task, he is burdened by the weight of governance and asks the Lord for the wisdom to do what is right. When the Lord appears to him in a dream and asks him what he wants, Solomon does not ask for “long life or riches”, but the wisdom to discern right from wrong – the wisdom to govern God’s people equitably and justly. He was granted this wish, and was also granted riches and honour because God was so pleased with his act of humility – rather than asking to boost his own status. King Solomon became well known for his great riches beyond human knowing, but also for his wisdom in ruling – so that other rulers came from afar to hear him and learn from what he had to say.

This theme of humility is one that permeates all of our readings today, but none as much as the Gospel. Our Gospel lesson is a familiar one: the parable of the pharisee and the publican. Jesus told this parable to some people that were listening to him whom he perceived to be full of themselves and looked down on others. The Pharisee stood up tall and thanked God for how great he was, and that he was not like this mere Publican. Meanwhile, the Publican stood far back with his eyes cast down feeling not worthy to be there at all, saying, “God be merciful to me, a sinner”. He, Jesus says, is the one who went home justified, for “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”.

Here, our Lord praises the humble tax collector, for he was coming before God repentant – knowingly a sinner. He was not as the proud Pharisee who merely gave thanks for how great he was – instead he came before God to say sorry and ask for forgiveness.

Many leaders in the Early Church found in this parable not just a praising of humility but a narrative *against* the sin of pride. Pride, which they say, always gets in the way of the proper worshipping of God. We know that Jesus told this parable to some members of his audience “who trusted in themselves as just”. St. Basil the Great points out that Jesus describes the pharisee as standing up and praying *with himself* – not with God – “for his sin of pride turned him in upon himself”. St. Augustine says that given what the Pharisee says, it’s clear he has no desire to better himself – he gives no room for God’s grace.

These same authors remark that the Pharisee not only had to boast about his goodness but even attacked the Publican standing in the room with him. In fact, *because* the Publican was there, the Pharisee felt even better about himself. St. John Chrysostom writes, “We do not give thanks by speaking ill of others. When you give thanks to God, let Him alone be your thought. Do not let your mind turn to men; and do not condemn your neighbour... He who speaks ill of others does great harm to himself and to others.” And St. Augustine said, “Examining [the Pharisee’s] words you find he asks nothing of God. He came up to pray, [but]

he has no wish to ask God for anything. He wishes simply to praise himself; and insult the other man praying there.”

The Pharisee, in his boasting, hurts himself, the Publican, and his own relationship with God. What a terrible irony that is: that one of the most religious of the Jews here is doing the most to damage his relationship with the Almighty. But God loves even more those who acknowledge their faults – those who come before him in humility to repent and repair their relationship with Him. This parable is really one about the dangers of pride, but also the virtues of humility, honesty, and repentance.

Something we hear about more and more are members of our society, even members of our own families, saying they believe in God but do not want to associate with organized religion. Have you ever stopped to think about why that is? For some, sure, they do not like the formality of church services, or they were embarrassed when they were younger by being called up to the front to say or sing something. For many, the reality is that nobody in their peer group goes to church, so they have no comrades there. But another group of people chooses to disassociate with organized religion because they have had a bad experience. Perhaps they met somebody like the Pharisee in today’s Gospel, who in raising themselves up, took another person down.

Does somebody you know come to mind when you hear about the Pharisee in today’s parable? I would wager we all have somebody in our lives who might act this way. In fact, it can sometimes be all too easy to be precisely that person ourselves. We all are proud of ourselves at times, and that is normal, but we cannot let that pride take over and supplant God. It’s a slippery slope. In all our moments of pride, we must thank God for the blessings he has given us, and pray that he continues to guide us on our journey. Because as St. Augustine says, we must always leave room to ask God to continue to better us. We must come to God thankful for his blessings, but still repenting of our many shortcomings.

We are human, we will always make mistakes, and we will continue to arrogantly think of ourselves as better than others. We are always susceptible to mortal sin, but we must bring our shortcomings to God so that he might redeem us of their weight. For our God is a God of forgiveness, love, and mercy.

The primary focus of our lives – the goal – should be to please God in all we do; to think about our relationship with him and keep that in perspective as we deal with others. We should want our family, friends, and neighbours to share in that same relationship, and all of our choices should be informed *from* that relationship. This is what King Solomon models for us in our Old Testament lesson. He models not only humility, but he is rewarded for wanting the wisdom to bring his people into a loving relationship with God – and he is certainly granted this in abundance. But, Solomon’s tale is also simultaneously a word of caution and a reassurance. Sure, he was granted this gift of God, but his later choices to abandon God in favour of idols caused him to lose his kingdom and all that he had gained. This is the caution.

The reassurance, though, is that unlike Solomon’s many heirs, we now through Jesus can stray and come back, and stray and come back to God innumerable times as long as we repent for our misdeeds. Despite the apostasy of Solomon, his sons, and many generations that followed him, the royal line of David is redeemed through Jesus. Now God will welcome back his prodigal sons and daughters with open arms and with the fattened calf and a great feast. What is important is that we turn to him in humility and repentance – that we open ourselves to accept his influence in our lives. Offer to God the praise that he is owed, and welcome him in to change your heart.

“For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”