

The Thirtieth Sunday of the Year (Trinity 20)

One of the important stories in the news this week has been the provision of free school meals during half term and in the Christmas holidays. Whichever side you take in this very complicated and emotive issue, there is no getting away from the fact that an often-repeated theme of sacred scripture is the special care God has for the poor, the underprivileged, and the outcasts of society. The Old Testament prophet, Sirach, says that the Lord God "will not ignore the supplication of the orphan, or the widow when she pours out her complaint."

St. Luke is especially known for his sympathy for the plight of the outcasts and, consequently, it is he who tells the memorable story of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

If ever there was an outcast of society in the time of Jesus, it was the local tax collector. He had plenty of power and plenty of money, most of it skimmed off the taxes he collected. He had the power to make the final decision on how much each family must pay. But he had no friends. As Mother Theresa points out, the poorest of the poor are those who are unloved. And the tax collector was the greatest of the unloved.

However, in this parable, the tax collector has repented all the crimes that he committed. He kneels in the very back of the temple, unworthy to approach the altar and confesses his sinfulness to the lord.

In contrast, the Pharisee, standing proudly in the front of the temple, trumpets his achievements. I once heard a story about a man who always found fault with everyone, and especially his wife. She could do nothing right. One morning she asked what he wanted for breakfast. He said: 'I want some coffee, bacon, toast, and 2 eggs, one fried, one scrambled.' She worked hard to prepare the best possible meal, set it on the table, then waited for his approval. He looked at the meal and said; 'You've done it again; you scrambled the wrong egg.'

The Pharisee in the parable was like that man. Nobody except him could do anything right. "I thank you that I am not like the rest of men grasping, crooked, like this miserable tax collector."

The man who went home from the temple justified was the tax collector, the one who recognized his sinfulness and asked for God's mercy.

When we read the parables, we usually identify with one of the characters depicted in the story. If I were to ask you with whom in this story you most easily identify, you would probably say the tax collector. That means we like what he did. But it also means we think we are more like him than we are like the Pharisee. That is something we need to question. If most of us were like the tax collector, there would be no point in Jesus telling this story. He is suggesting, ever so subtly, that maybe we are sometimes very much like the Pharisee.

Jesus asks us to reflect on the pharisaic acts of our own lives, the times we judged we were better than others, the times we didn't give to the poor or the missions or local needy persons because we felt we had already done our fair share. The times we heard the invitation at the beginning of the Eucharist "let us call to mind our sins and failures of the past" then spent the next moments in blank thought because we could remember nothing in our past for which we had remorse, or because we thought "we have done this so often in the past it isn't important to do it again.

Today we are asked to reflect on these and other pharisaic actions of our lives, then to begin each day by saying with the tax collector, and saying it with conviction: "Lord be merciful to me a sinner. I confess to Almighty God and ask all the angels and saints and you, my brothers and sisters on whom I have so often looked down, to pray for me to the Lord our God."