

## Homily for the Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)(27/10/19)

On the face of it, this parable seems very clear and simple. There is clearly a good guy, the tax collector who is so aware of his failings that he doesn't ask God for anything but mercy; and there is a bad guy, the Pharisee who is so self-important that he is better at seeing everyone else's faults than his own. It looks pretty simple: there is a good guy, we should be more like him; there is a bad guy, we should be less like him. Done. But Jesus' teaching is never that simple, and his parables in particular are never that simple; they are designed to make us react instinctively, but then to look again and see something more.

The bad guy is, pretty clearly, the bad guy. He is self-righteous, full of his own virtue, and very well aware of other people's failures. He is, in that light, a bit of a caricature. He is SO bad that it looks like the description is laid on very thick. Surely no-one could really be that bad? But hang on just a moment. If we are saying to ourselves this bad man is so bad surely no-one could be like that, what are we saying? We are really saying 'Thank God I am not like him' – and so in fact that is just what we are, we are exactly like him! The bad gut turns out to be everyman, everywoman. And what about the good guy in the story: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'. This is a beautiful prayer. In fact, if the only prayer you ever said was this, your prayer life would already be climbing high. But that's all he says. It is so far ahead of the Pharisee, but it isn't enough. The tax collector is a sinner, that's right. He has realized this, and that is good. But is it enough? If I come to you and say 'Be merciful to me, I just smashed into your car', you might be glad that I have told you, its better than ignoring it or just running away, but wouldn't you want to hear me say 'I smashed into your car, I am so sorry'. That sounds so much better. Better still: 'I smashed into your car, I am so sorry, I will sort it out'. The tax collector goes home at rights with God, but he still remains a work in progress.

The Pharisee in this story is so busy thinking about someone else's faults that he cannot see his own. Isn't that true of so many of us? When we criticize someone for all the things that they have done that we don't like, are we not in some way just being like this Pharisee? We are so delighted to have the chance to complain about someone else that we waste time on this fruitless exercise, when we could use that time much better. Complaining about someone else, or commenting on their faults, does not in any way make the world a better place. Nor does it make that other person a better person. Nor does it make me a better person. Nothing is moved on at all by the Pharisee's disdain for the tax collector, nothing changes. I cannot change another person (or not without entering into a rather challenging relationship of mutual truth-telling that we are seldom courageous enough to set out on); I cannot change that other person, but I can change myself. A little more honesty might have made the Pharisee a better man, might even have disturbed himself enough to make him change. That would have been a great step forward. But what if he had done something more? What if the Pharisee had looked at the tax-collector, a man clearly racked with guilt and misery, and asked himself: What has brought this poor man to such a miserable

state? To criticize another person is such a tempting thing to do, and of course sometimes it is the right thing to do. But much more useful, much more productive, than starting with criticism would be to start with trying to understand them. What has brought them to this state? What is to be done to rescue them? What is to be done to make sure this doesn't happen again?

Lets imagine you have a friend or a work colleague who always seems to be angry. They shout or snap at everyone, and no-one much likes it. The easy thing to do is simply to complain to one another about how annoying he is. In a funny way we erase his personhood and reduce him to just being 'the angry man'. This doesn't do him any good, and it doesn't do us any good either. Do we stop to ask ourselves why he is like this? Angry people are seldom happy people. How has it got to this state? We may not be the one to talk to him or to offer him help, but we may be. We certainly owe it to him to try and understand, to leave open the question that there is something more complex here than we first thought.

Jesus has a great gift for seeing into people's souls. Because he knows himself so well, he is able to know other people well. He is able to see them for what they are, and while sometimes he is very critical, always he is understanding.

Whenever we read a Gospel passage, the question to ask is 'What is it to me?' Why read this, what difference does it make to what I will be doing on, I don't know, say Wednesday morning? If you carry this story about with you this week and keep it in your mind, I'll bet there will be at least one occasion when you think to yourself 'Hang on, I have got things wrong here'.

Don't be too quick to congratulate yourself on being better than others.

Don't be too quick to dismiss the behaviour of others out of hand.

Never criticize the failures of others without trying to understand why they are the way they are.

Whatever you think about yourself and other people, its you that you need to work on changing.

Maybe we are a bit more like the Pharisee than we like to think.