

Sermon for St Nicholas', Islip

26th October 2025

2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18

Luke 18: 9-14

As Brian said at the beginning of the service, our community has known tragedy this week. Potentially a crime has been committed, but whatever the circumstances the death of a child has been a very great shock.

Today we pray for the repose of the soul of the little girl; we pray for those most affected by her death; and we pray for our community as it reacts and responds.

And perhaps appropriately we've listened to two readings which are about making judgments, for many will be offering judgments in these days.

In the first reading there was St Paul, towards the end of his life, in Rome, making judgments about all he had achieved, and those who had opposed him. An individual evaluating his place and behaviour before God.

Similarly, Jesus tells us a story, a parable, about two men making judgments about themselves.

Judgment was one of Jesus' favourite topics, perhaps because he knew that all human communities were so prone to it but not always reflecting God's judgments. Let's hear what he had to say.

Unlike most of his parables Jesus directs this story at a very particular group of people. But he leaves us, those of us listening, to decide whether we're included in his target audience. "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves...and regarded others with contempt."

Perhaps Jesus had identified something which modern sociologists now describe. They say that about 10% of our society is made up of 'God-fearers'. This hasn't got anything to do with religious practice but rather refers to people who see the world in terms of moral certainties, as black and white. 'God-fearers' are absolutely sure of how the world ought to work, and that their convictions are the only truth. They are in their nature loud, shouty, and they happily intimidate others with their noise, with their opinions and judgments. "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous."

It's an irony that we call such people 'God-fearers' because this parable is primarily about who gets God's approval, whose attitude and behaviour Jesus applauds – and it isn't those who exalt themselves with their certainties. It's the dreaded tax collector who is presented by Jesus as the model of humility. Humility which means living out of our dependence on God. The tax collector is despised. You'll remember Zacchaeus whom we meet in the next chapter in Luke. When in Sunday School I sang songs about him being a 'very little man' which was why he climbed the tree. Perhaps more likely he climbed the tree wanting to see what was going on, whilst also escaping the hostilities of the crowd below. The despised tax collector had learnt humility by living close to his failings and people's disdain for him. Just as often we learn humility as the fruit of pain, and disappointment, and by letting ourselves down.

So, whilst the Pharisee was able to boast, “I’m not like those others...” the tax collector was able to recognize himself in the crimes and deficiencies of others.

We have a parable that encourages humility, of knowing ourselves all too capable of betraying what’s important: but in that betrayal discovering a deeper dependence on the mercy of God. The tax collector’s prayer is, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Yet it’s also a parable that warns us that we’re easily misled. Consider how Jesus crafts this story.

The Pharisee and the tax collector are doing the same thing. They’re both praying. They’re doing it in the same place, in God’s house, the Temple. Yet those who see them about their business instantly distinguish between them. They almost certainly make a judgment which favours the Pharisee. We look on these two men through the lens of our social judgments. We see their reputations, their roles, their clothing and posture. We make assumptions about their piety or lack of it. Our own desire to be successful or virtuous means we favour the morally upright and righteous Pharisee. After all he tells us he exercises the disciplines of a spiritual life in his fasting and charitable giving, his tithing. We believe he can be relied upon to show us the way, whilst we despise the tax collector or his modern equivalent. We practice contempt in our judgments.

But Jesus warns us about the jeopardy of such contempt.

Reflecting on this parable again this week took me back to the Reith Lectures last year which were given by Gwen Adshead, a forensic psychiatrist who works in prisons and is also a practicing Christian. She used the lectures, which you can still access on BBC Sounds, to consider her work with some of the most violent offenders in our prisons. Her fourth lecture looked at the possibility of change in those who have committed violence. Listening to her speak certainly challenged some of the judgments I make, and you might find it stimulating to revisit them.

Jesus is surely warning us to beware of the judgments we make based on outward appearances, and the assumptions society encourages because we rely on stereotypes or easy prejudices. We rely also for our judgments on our own egos, our self-confidence.

Is that why Jesus plants a trick into this parable: to illustrate to us how we’re so easily fooled by our own self-importance. Here’s the trick.

Who do you identify with in this parable? With the Pharisee, or with the tax collector? Because if it’s the tax collector, and if you say to yourself, ‘I’d never be as pompous and as self-satisfied as that Pharisee, parading my status and achievements’; do you see that you’ve fallen into the trap of making a false judgment? By our sense of superiority, we’re showing our contempt for others.

Jesus is so clever. By drawing us into this story he not only reveals the universal tendency to cast judgment on others, but he shows us a far better way: and that is to pray –

‘God be merciful to me, a sinner.’