

# Mercy to sinners alive and departed

Last Sunday after Trinity – 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2016

## PHARISEE AND TAX COLLECTOR

A bishop and a banker went to church together ....

It sounds like the start of a joke.

And so does this:

*‘A Pharisee and a tax-collector went up to the Temple to pray ... ‘*

Like a joke, it is the disparity between expectation and reality that sets you up for a surprise.

Pharisees (like bishops), were meant to be upstanding and moral individuals, famous for their piety.

Tax collectors (like bankers) were a cultural byword for corruption and greed, even if it was only a tiny minority who were.

In the story Jesus tells, the situation is reversed.

Though outwardly decent, the Pharisee is rotten to the core.

He glances at God, but really he contemplates himself.

His prayer is all ‘me, me, me’.

He even goes *beyond* the requirements of the Law by tithing *everything*.

When he prays, he goes confidently into the middle of the courtyard of the Temple, believing that he has nothing to hold him back or be ashamed of.

When he prays, he compares himself to others and finds them wanting.

He has no sense of sin, or humility, or dependence upon God.

He is all-sufficient, *'trusting in himself'* as Jesus describes it.

The tax collector makes no claims for himself.

No excuses or boasts before God.

He barely dares to enter the courtyard of the Temple, standing 'far off' not even daring to look up to heaven as he prays.

And he utters the simplest of prayers, *'God be merciful to me, a sinner'*.

He comes, naked and defenceless into the presence of God.

He is someone who knows himself – including his faults and failings.

## **SALVATION**

What we see in this contrast is an ancient and recurring mistake in the human relationship with God. The Pharisee believes that he can bring about his own salvation through his own actions, and can therefore be certain that all is right between himself and God. That he has done what is needed to be 'saved'.

It is a complacency that all of us fall into from time to time.

There is more than a little of the Pharisee in all of us – even in the desire not to be the Pharisee!

Christian faith tells us, that we cannot be saved by what we do, because we cannot *make* God love us more than he already does. It is his grace alone that saves and redeems – so all we can do is throw ourselves upon his mercy.

This may appear harsh, but it is nothing more than the sober reality that none of us have anything to boast about before God.

It is also the essence of love, for none of us have anything that makes us worthy of the love that God has for us – it is something given for who we are, not what we do.

No matter how important we are in the eyes of the world, or how we appear to others, God cares nothing for such things. He sees us for who we are, and what is in our heart.

Love should prompt our actions in this life, but those same actions help us not at all, if our inward disposition is one of pride in our own achievements and abilities.

What all this tells us, is that salvation is much more complex than we might imagine, and even as some Christians make out.

It is not an event, but a process.

A process of becoming ourselves,

Of developing self-knowledge

Of growing into love.

A process that continue throughout our lives – and perhaps even beyond it.

## **ALL SOULS**

In less than two week's time, is a day known as All Souls.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> November is a day when we are particularly asked to pray for those we have known and loved, who have died.

The tax-collector prays for mercy, and so we pray for mercy upon them, and for ourselves.

We do so not because we fear God's anger, but because we believe in his love.

Just as our love for someone does not end when they die, neither does God's.

Just as we pray for someone when they are alive, why should we stop doing so when they die?

There is a great separation between this realm and another, but there is one golden link that crosses the great divide – it is called prayer.

The love of the human heart is the most real and the most beautiful of all the realities that we know. It is the richest gift we have to offer. It is the love that joins us together as lovers, friends and neighbours. Our faith teaches us that the anguish of parting cannot destroy this most real of all realities.

The love that has been,

the affection that has existed,  
the ties that have been woven,  
that life that has been shared  
the joys and sorrows experienced together.

And in our prayers for them, we affirm, that through the Resurrection of Christ, that love can never ever die.

It's true, we do not quite know what our prayers do for them,

But it is the most natural thing in the world to do.

The theologian Austin Farrer wrote:

*'May they rest in peace and may light perpetual shine upon them- those millions among whom our friends are lost, those millions for whom we cannot choose but pray; because prayer is a sharing in the love of the heart of God, and the love of God is earnestly set towards the salvation of his spiritual creatures.'*

It is not morbid to do so. Indeed, it is the opposite of morbidity.

We pray for them, not because they are dead, but because they are **alive** in Christ.

We pray for them, not because we cannot let go, but because we have let go, or we are in the process of doing so.

We pray for their happiness and wellbeing wherever they may be, not to bring them back here.

We pray also, to counter the denial of death and the bleak nihilism of our society which fears death, that causes our society to hide it away that none of us may see it, or even speak of it.

Of course, Christians fear death too, especially the approach to it, which may bring much pain and suffering – but at the same time we also hope – for we believe it is the gateway to eternity, not the entry into nothingness. It leads us not into darkness, but into light.

It is also true, that none of us knows what it is like to die.

There's no pretending otherwise.

Indeed, the scriptures provide no clear answer, only hints and signs.

What we do know is that we shall come into the presence of God, and we shall know ourselves for who we truly are.

We shall confront the reality of ourselves, with all our sins and failings – and this is a difficult process – but they will all be purged away by the burning fire of God's love and mercy.

And perhaps, the more we know ourselves in humility in this life, like the tax-collector, the easier and quicker that process shall be.

And beyond that – there is joy.

The joy of God's presence forever.

## **INVITATION TO PRAY**

My brothers and sisters, what more can I say to you?

Praying for the departed is one of the spiritual acts of mercy, something we should all do for our own good, and the good of others.

And at All Souls we have a wonderful opportunity to experience that unity of the Church on earth and the Church in heaven, which is one Church, and which we also call the Communion of the Saints.

On that day, there will be a Requiem Mass at 12 Noon and at 8pm.

And again, throughout November, on every Saturday at 9.30am.

You are invited to write down the names of those who will be prayed for at one of those services, who will be remembered before God, and united with Christ in His presence in the Sacrament of the Altar.

But not only that, you also are invited to be present at one of those services to pray also.

This is an act of mercy that we should all share in.

For with the dead there is both communion and reunion.

Though we are separated in time and space from those we love who have passed on, through prayer we are in communion with them, and we look for that day when we shall be reunited.

By prayer, we do not commend ourselves like the Pharisees, but coming before him in humility and simplicity of heart, like the tax-collector, we throw ourselves upon his mercy and love – so that we may all one day be exalted to his right hand in the glory of heaven.

*Fr Stephen Stavrou*