

# What we (really) think about ourselves and others

23 October 2022

## INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ...

At this point in the service, we would normally have a prayer of confession ... having first proclaimed something of God's goodness, power and saving love – what we might call **praise**.

It's as we become aware of the awesome greatness and kindness of God that we may have a sense of our own inadequacy and brokenness.

So then in a time of repentance we confess our own brokenness and the brokenness of the world. Most often we do this as a confessional prayer at this point in the service. Today we're going to hold over this prayer until **after** the message.

Meanwhile, to help us start thinking about the Gospel reading, we know that we have various emotions at different times. Sometimes we show them as **emojis** or **faces** in texts or messages ... a unique language that originated in Japan in the late 1990s and designed for mobile phones.

You'll probably know some of these – happy face, sad face (or disappointed). Other ones are more tricky ... laughing/crying (new Covid lockdown anyone?) or woozy (confused, exhausted, drunk) ...

Coming back to feelings, being proud of yourself and what you do can be a good thing – it's called **self-esteem**. But if we start to think that we're **better** or **more important** than other people it can lose us a lot of friends. The Scriptures tell us that God **resists** proud people.

God loves every person but sometimes we cut ourselves off from God's love by how we think and speak and act. God wants to talk with us – honestly – about both our problems and our happy times. We do this through prayer.

## BIBLE READINGS

### 1 Peter 5:1-11

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: be good shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

In the same way, you who are younger, learn from your elders.

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.'

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. ... And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

To God be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

### Luke 18:9-14

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

'But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

## MESSAGE

One of the characteristics of we humans is that we have lots of **feelings** and **emotions** – about ourselves **and** about other people. Some of us are more in touch with these feelings than others, and some of us are better – or worse – at expressing these feelings in appropriate ways.

Who remembers this Pixar movie?



Some of our feelings about ourselves are helpful and good – and build up a **healthy self-esteem**. These feelings encourage us to try new things or to be resilient, knowing that we've made it through tough situations before and can do so again thanks to our competence and abilities.

But we can also have **less helpful feelings** – perhaps when younger males think of themselves as **invincible** – or younger women come to hate themselves because of some **idealised version of beauty** – or older people



become convinced that they're **not valued** because they no longer have a paid job – or people who have been **criticised** who come to believe that those criticisms define them.

We also have feelings about **other people**. We often love our close friends and family – the people who we're prepared to let into our lives and who accept us for who we are – warts and all.

But then again we are also good at holding onto **prejudices** and **stereotypes** about certain types of people – perhaps depending on the colour of their skin, how they talk or what sort of role they



have. So we may have strong – and perhaps negative feelings – towards politicians, for instance, or other Christians or even ... Collingwood supporters.

It's the same when we come to the Bible and read stories about Jesus. We've been taught from Sunday school that **Jesus** is always the **hero** in every story and so we have only positive feelings towards whatever Jesus says or does.

And we've been taught that the **Pharisees** are the bad guys who are always having disputes and arguments with Jesus, so that whenever Pharisees are mentioned in a story, we're immediately suspicious of them. Likewise we've been taught that Jesus is the friend of **tax collectors** and **prostitutes**, so they must be okay.



It was very different back in Jesus' day. **Tax collectors** were regarded as **traitors** and **scumbags** – obnoxious and disgusting people who worked on behalf of the occupying Roman army collecting taxes from poor and struggling peasant Israelites. They were seen as **mean** and **greedy**, ripping off ordinary people and making themselves rich. Next week's Gospel reading is about exactly this sort of tax collector, Zacchaeus, whom the community can't stand. The contempt with which tax collectors were held might put them on a par with internet scammers or paedophiles today.

By contrast, **Pharisees** were regarded as upright, respectable, model citizens – devoted to serving Israel's God and diligently living out God's laws, regular students of the Scriptures. So the surprising thing is, of all the characters in the Gospel stories, we Christians and regular church goers are most like the Pharisees.

And so we come to today's Gospel reading that Jesus tells about people like the Pharisees – those who were confident of their standing before God.

In Jesus' parable, a Pharisee comes to the temple to pray. In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes such people as wanting to be seen when they pray and praying with many words. We're given just a short summary of his presumably much longer prayer ... notice all the 'I' language.



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*God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.*

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The Pharisee compares himself favourably to other people that he looks down upon – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – and especially tax collectors. Then he puffs himself up by reminding God that he fasts twice a week – and probably lets everyone else know that he's fasting – and that he tithes a tenth of his income ... and, who knows, perhaps even a tenth of his mint, dill and cumin ... another criticism that Jesus makes in Matthew's story.

If emojis were a thing back then, perhaps the Pharisee would think of himself with this emoji ...



... and the tax collector with either this emoji ...



or perhaps this one ...



Meanwhile, the tax collector also comes to pray, but refuses to even look up, and beats his chest as he pleads with God in a very simple prayer ...

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*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

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He recognises his own shortcomings and sees himself as a sinner, a person who falls short of God's ways. He begs God for mercy.

Again, if emojis were a thing, he might use this one ...  
(shame, embarrassment)



... or this one (humility, silence)



The unexpected **reversal** that comes at the end of the parable is that it was the **tax collector**, rather than the **Pharisee**, who went home justified and forgiven in God's sight.



The focus in the parable, then, is the importance of **humility** for those who want to follow the ways of Jesus. This forms part of a wider block of teaching in this part of Luke's Gospel on the **attitudes** and **habits** to be adopted by his followers. These include ...

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*Showing **kindness** to strangers, especially to the poor in our midst*

*Being willing to **serve others** rather than expecting to be waited on*

*Being **thankful** for God's blessings and turning this into **praise of God***

***Persevering in prayer**, especially when seeking justice*

*Approach God with **humility** and not **arrogance***

*Being **generous** towards others with the resources we have at our disposal*

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These are some of the attitudes and habits that mark the **kingdom of God** and that contrast strongly with the attitudes we find in **our culture** ... where it's



me first, meeting my wants first, seeing blessings as my right, boasting about my achievements and often ignoring the needs of others ... just like the Pharisee in the parable.



According to Jesus' insight, religious people are just as likely to slip into these worldly habits as anyone else. Hence the Pharisee's contempt for people like tax collectors and those who didn't or couldn't measure up to the Pharisees' high standards. It's so easy to fall into the habit of **judging** others without necessarily knowing their full story and their struggles. This is so important for everyone who volunteers at places like Helping Hand or the weekly lunches here at Croydon North ... we don't usually know the full story and so we're not to judge the person or their choices.

In Paul's writing we're encouraged instead to think of ourselves with

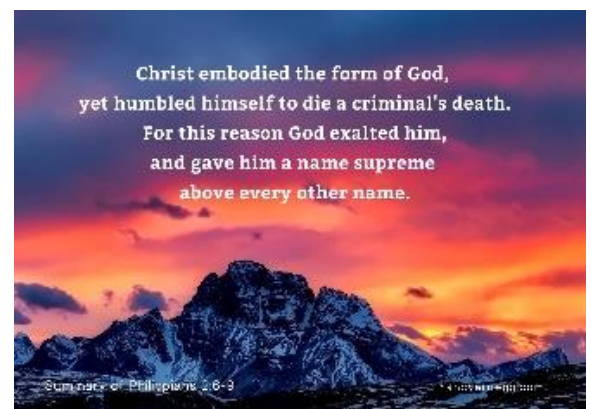
Arrogance

Healthy  
self-esteem

Worm  
theology

'sober judgment' – not regarding ourselves as **better** than other people but equally not adopting what I call '**worm theology**' – that we're useless and can't make any valuable contribution. The right place to be is to have **healthy self-esteem** – to be confident in our own skin, knowing that we're acceptable in God's sight – yet willing to **love** our neighbour and not to look down on them.

In all of this, **our model is Jesus** of course. In Paul's letter to the Philippian church, Paul quotes from an early Christian hymn which states that although Jesus was in the form of **God** he chose to take the form of a **servant**, and how he humbled himself – even to the point of death on a cross. The hymn finishes with God therefore exalting Jesus. And the message in today's parable is similar – God will exalt those – like Jesus – who humble themselves, but those who want to exalt themselves will be humbled.



And so we come to thinking about prayers of confession. We're encouraged to confess our sins every time that we pray the Lord's Prayer ...

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*Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*

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This part of the Lord's prayer invites us to take a moment to pause and to recognise our own brokenness and how we wound others and then to ask God for mercy, knowing God's character of compassion.

This line also calls us to forgive others.

We pray this as individuals of course, but when we gather for worship we also pray in a similar way as a community.

So let's take a few moments for **silent reflection** before we join together in prayer ...

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*Welcoming God,  
We admit that we often find prayer difficult – especially prayers of  
confession.  
Where do we start? What do we say? How do we listen to you?  
How do we get beyond the words about sin and forgiveness in the Jesus  
prayer that we often rush through without thinking?  
  
Give us both courage and honesty to spend time with you in prayer.  
  
Help us to see you as you truly are ...  
  
... and help us to accept ourselves in the way that you see us and love us.  
  
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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