

MESSAGE – Relationship not rules

Stereotyping people

Whether we realise it or not, we all have a tendency to **stereotype** people. So when I say that someone is ... a Collingwood supporter ... or a Greens voter ... or a politician ... we start to imagine what that person is like and whether we want to associate with them or not.

Similarly, whether we like it or not, **we Christians** have a certain stereotype in our culture. We're often seen as arrogant, hypocritical or out of touch by non-Christians. We're perceived as thinking of ourselves as 'better' than others, as trying to fix other people's problems, as having outdated sexual morals and more recently of hiding all the worst paedophiles in our midst.

Stereotyping was no different in Jesus' day. When someone said '**tax collector**' people would bristle with hatred – because tax collectors were seen as treacherous and greedy traitors who sided with the occupying Romans and ripped off ordinary people. Likewise, when someone said '**Pharisee**' most of Jesus' contemporaries – **unlike** most later Christians – would think respectable, law-abiding, model citizen. Perhaps not dissimilar to a regular **churchgoer** in our culture.

Jesus draws on these two stereotypes in his parable. In our day, he might begin like this ... Let me tell you a story about a bikie from an outlawed motor cycle gang and a teacher, who both turned up at church one day ...

God sees beyond outward appearance

God, it seems, doesn't see things the same way that we do. When we read the story of the prophet Samuel going to the house of Jesse to anoint the next king of Israel, David, we learn that 'the Lord does not see as people see; **they** look on the outward appearance, but **the Lord** looks on the heart'. And so Jesse's impressive looking older sons are all passed over in favour of the youngest, David, who, though far from perfect, is later called 'a man after God's own heart'.

So in today's parable, how does **God** view the Pharisee and the tax collector? **The tax collector** has no pretensions about himself. He knows that he is despised by most people. He knows that his ways of blackmail, greed and corruption do not conform with God's ways and that he falls well short of the mark. He is well aware of his position before God. He can only look down at the ground, beat his chest as a sign of repentance and ask for God's mercy. And as the Gospels consistently illustrate, God delights to show **grace** to those who admit their wrongs and brokenness and who seek mercy and forgiveness. The parable doesn't tell us what happens when the repentant tax collector goes home – but – in the very next chapter of Luke's Gospel – we have the story about Zacchaeus – another infamous tax collector – whose life is transformed by his encounter with Jesus – and by the grace he receives. Maybe the two tax collectors were the same person?

The **Pharisee**, by contrast, trusts in his **own** sense of worthiness. Notice the focus on himself ... I thank you God that I am not like other riffraff – like that tax collector over there ... I fast twice a week ... I tithe all my income. The Pharisee doesn't so much seek **God's** perspective but rather hoists his **own** distorted perspective onto God. Note his focus on himself with one hand and the accusing finger towards the tax collector.

The parable ends on a note of **reversal** that is so typical of Luke's Gospel. All who exalt themselves – those who rely on their wealth or power or sense of inherent goodness – will in the end be humbled, while those who humble themselves before God – who clearly see their own brokenness and need – will be welcomed and lifted up.

This great reversal that the kingdom of God brings is first expressed in Mary's Song, the **Magnificat**, that we remember during Advent – the proud and powerful will be scattered, while the lowly and poor will be raised up. Or we might think of the parable of the Prodigal Son, where the greedy and wasteful younger son is welcomed back with open arms while the hard-working but resentful older son excludes himself from the joyous celebration.

How can this reversal be explained? Does God really reward people who behave badly and ignore those who try to follow God's ways? Is there more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents or over the 99 righteous people who have no need to repent?

In their letters in the NT, both James and Peter quote a proverb that teaches that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5). In the Bible, a proud person relies on their own wisdom, their own strength, their own cleverness ... and has no need of God in their life. It sounds like a much younger version of myself ... so sure that I didn't need anyone's help, least of all God's help.

But a humble person acknowledges their reliance on God to guide their steps, to provide what's needed for life – as we pray in the Lord's Prayer ... 'Give us today our daily bread' – and to release them from the things that bind us.

I wonder which type of person we are most of the time?

In many ways, I suspect that we often fit into the Pharisee stereotype – we see ourselves as respectable citizens, trying to follow God's ways, consistently reliable in our worship and our prayer. **Does anyone – apart from myself – see something of themselves in the Pharisee?** If so, this passage contains a warning that pride or arrogance can trip us up. Do we perhaps rely more than we realise on our wealth or intellect or our spiritual practices to maintain our sense of worth before God? The message for us when we find ourselves having these attitudes is that God looks at our heart and our motivations and calls us to repent.

At other times we may identify more easily with the **tax collector** – often criticised, feeling fairly worthless and knowing how far short we fall of God's ways. When we feel like this, the good news from today's passage is that when we are courageous and tell God honestly how we feel inside, God won't turn us away but instead will welcome us with open arms and lift our heads up. The truth is that **we all** have shortcomings and blind spots where we fail to see where God is at work in others – often in the most unlikely places and people. If we can humble ourselves, we might just begin to see what we can learn from the poor, the weak and the broken.

Spend a moment or two now thinking of times when you have been more like the proud Pharisee or more like the downcast tax collector ...

Relationship not rules

Before we finish I want to say a few words about **prayer**, and especially about prayers of confession. At its heart, prayer is intended to be **two way communication** with God. We pour out what's on our heart to God – our hurts, our sadnesses, our thanks, our confusion, our needs – and we **listen** to what God's Spirit might be saying to us – reminding us of God's heart for justice and the poor, of God's love for us and for all people, and God's willingness to forgive us and set us free.

The tax collector seems to grasp much better that God seeks **relationship** with us much more than just a mechanical following of rules – what we must or must not do in order to please God. In the end, it's relationship with God that matters more than following all the rules we might want to invent or follow. And like any human relationship, developing a relationship with God requires time and commitment and honesty.

... which is why prayers of confession matter. Such prayers are not meant to make us feel bad about ourselves, or to make us feel worthless, or to be spoken with mindless repetition. Rather they give us an opportunity to be reminded that we live in ways that ignore God and ignore the needs of our neighbour. Such prayers alert us to the selfishness that easily creeps into our lives ... but also of the grace and mercy of God who shows us a better way to live.

Let us take a few moments for **silent reflection** before I lead in prayer.

Welcoming God,

We admit that we often find prayer difficult – or mechanical.

Where do we start? What do we say?

How do we get beyond the well-known words of the Jesus' prayer?

Dare we be honest with you, lest you turn us away? ...

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.