

Sermon Notes for Trinity XI

“justified rather than the other” (Gospel)

The Prayer Book for today has two very simple readings, we think. That is probably a superficial reaction. Always, the biggest challenge is to recover the pattern of thought of the original hearers – which the speaker took for granted. It is never obvious. In our secularised world, people do not pray. If they do so, they do not pray out loud (unless, as is less and less the case, they join, as anonymously as they can, in public worship). So the Lord is obviously in a very different environment.

We have great difficulty establishing what a Pharisee was in our Lord's time. Not, probably, a priest nor a scribe – this seems to be a lay movement for some sort of strict observance, perhaps with a hope that this would trigger God's mercy to Israel in its affliction. For we are told that Pharisees tended to maintain the hope of Israel – whether resurrection or a dramatic Deliverance. So far forth, they are near the Lord's teaching – yet their observances are to him irrelevant if sincere, and often, as he accuses, insincere. However, I think this parable assumes sincerity. The Pharisee does what he says he does. By comparison, the Publican seems easy – a privatised collector of taxes. Still, not quite so easy. He is a Jew, and he prays. He is not a mere God-forsaker. Maybe he does not want a Deliverance which would put him out of employment. But he does, it seems, fear God's Judgement (with reason). We must be at or near Jerusalem, else why are these two characters visiting the Temple? They are not present for a feast, when attendance, if possible, might be held obligatory. They do not need the Temple for their prayers. No official liturgy is taking place; neither is involved in any form of sacrifice.

The Lord's parable makes one thing very clear; the Pharisee is at home and the Publican is not. And of course the point of the parable is that both are mistaken. The temple is a place of mercy (it may be useful to read Solomon's consecration prayer). The Publican asks for mercy (perhaps not expecting it) and God puts him in the class of the acquitted (for the passive “justified” implies God's decision). The Pharisee gives thanks (perhaps for God's mercy in bringing him to the right path) and God has no response. “Rather than” means “not justified”. This is not just a condemnation of boasting, or of asserting claims on God which we do not have, or of judging others, though it is all of these. He remains, in accordance with an old footballing joke, at “left outside”.

Our danger is that we are Pharisees. Yes, we won't “thank God that we are not as other men are”, because we are not quite so stupid as to articulate that thought (though the devil will tempt us to do so); we will dutifully imagine ourselves in the posture of the Publican, call ourselves “miserable sinners”, and (the risk is) think the better of ourselves for doing so. But we know, not that we are very observant, but how much more observant than the majority. Not that we are very devout, yet we make some gestures. Not adulterers, not extortioners – it is easy to think we have a claim on God for our limited virtues. It is as hard for us to achieve the posture of the Publican as it is for the devil to succeed in masquerading as an angel of light. But the Gospel is not about posturing.

Not about posturing, but about recognising that the eye of the Lord is upon us, and cannot be deceived. God knows our inadequacy, and far better than we ever can. Indeed, not the least of his mercy is to spare us more knowledge than we can endure – at least until we can endure more. God knows, and his purpose is merciful, to rescue all those who will let themselves be rescued. Newman on this passage: “It is the sight of God, revealed to the eye of faith, that makes us hideous to ourselves, from the contrast which we find ourselves to present to that great God at whom we look. It is the vision of Him in His infinite gloriousness, the All-holy, the All-beautiful, the All-perfect, which makes us sink into the earth with self-contempt and self-abhorrence. We are contented with ourselves till we contemplate Him. Why is it, I say, that the moral code of the world is so precise and well-defined? Why is the worship of reason so calm? Why was the religion of classic heathenism so joyous? Why is the framework of civilized society all so graceful and so correct? Why, on the other hand, is there so much of emotion, so much of conflicting and alternating feeling, so much that is high, so much that is abased, in the devotion of Christianity? It is because the Christian, and the Christian alone, has a revelation of God.” So may it be for us.