

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge
27th October 2019 (Trinity 19)

In his poem, *To a Louse. On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet at Church*, written in 1786, Robert Burns muses

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:

What if we could see ourselves as others see us? What if we could see ourselves as God sees us?

This morning's Gospel reading invites us to reflect on how we see and judge ourselves, and how we see and judge those around us. It invites us to consider the ways in which we compare ourselves with other people, and what the effects of that might be. If we could see ourselves as others see us, it would free us from many a blunder and foolish notion.

Jesus tells the parable to some people who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others". These are people who, for whatever reason, have a pretty high opinion of themselves, and a correspondingly low one of others. We don't know who his audience here is, but we might note that the parable immediately preceding this is told to the disciples, and what follows directly is the incident that is told in all three of the Synoptic Gospels in which Jesus rebukes the disciples for trying to prevent people bringing little children to him. Any of us might be the person who trusts that we are righteous, for one reason or another.

The parable concerns a Pharisee and a publican, or in some translations, a tax-collector who each go up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee is confident in his standing before God and in his righteousness, and engages in some pretty blatant heavenward virtue-signalling: I'm not like other people, especially him, here are all the virtuous things I do. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

How do we see him? How do we think God sees him?

There is nothing wrong with the worthy things he does, or with his adherence to his religious discipline, but with the fact that he uses it to compare others unfavourably against himself. God is not interested in our virtue-signalling, but in the habits of our hearts. The ethical choices we make are ours, and we make them for all kinds of different reasons, but they don't mean very much if we use them as the basis to judge ourselves superior to other people, or to regard them with a lack of generosity.

The publican stands far off, eyes cast down, smiting his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." We might surmise all kinds of things about the manner of his life, but it essentially doesn't matter. He recognises his faults, and entreats God to look upon him with his loving kindness. How do we see ourselves? How do we think God sees us?

The publican recognises that he is a sinner. He can see his own faults. When we gather for worship week by week, we confess our sins of thought, word, and deed, what we have done and what we have left undone. We do not do this to wallow in self-loathing about what awful people we are, or to embrace some sort of false humility. Most of us are not awful people, and we think and do good things as well as bad ones. We do it to recognise that we all put things in the way of

our relationship with God, and we all do things which harm God's good creation, and other people, and ourselves. We all get things wrong, and make a mess of things, and we need to acknowledge that, and ask for grace to amend our lives.

How do you see yourself? How do you think God sees you?

The publican asks God to be merciful to him, sinner that he is. He asks God to look upon him with loving-kindness, to see his faults and his weaknesses and still to love him. God is not interested in our virtue-signalling, or our perfect academic records, or the fronts we put up so that other people will like us or that we think will make us fit in a bit better. God is interested in us: in the reality of each one of us made in God's own image and likeness. God is interested in the habits of our hearts, in our openness to being transformed by his love, and to becoming daily more fully the people he intended us to be.

Jesus glosses the parable for his hearers: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." The parable invites us to be honest and realistic about ourselves, our faults and failings as well as the good. It reminds us of the dangers of judging ourselves by means of comparing ourselves – either positively or negatively – with other people. It highlights particularly the problems with thinking that we are more or less precious to God than other people are, or that God loves us any less or more than he loves other people. The Pharisee's real fault is his "holier-than-him" attitude, and the assumptions that flow from that. It warns against trusting that we are righteous – in our lives or attitudes or opinions – and so despising others who are, or think, or act differently. It reminds us that God does not judge according to outward appearance or human categories, but that God looks at our

hearts – at where we set our treasure, and what our motivations truly are.

God is not interested in our virtue-signalling, but in the habits of our hearts. God does not love some of us more or less than others, based on any of the categories we establish. We all get things wrong, and mess things up, and we all are made in God's image and precious in God's sight. God invites us to be honest with ourselves and honest with him; about who we are and might be, about our hopes and fears and failings, and to trust that God will look upon us with his loving-kindness. The more honest and charitable we can be with ourselves, hopefully the more honest and charitable we can be with and about other people.

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How do you see yourself? How do you think God in his loving-kindness sees you? From what blunders or foolish notions, or patterns of thinking or behaviour, might you be set free if you could look at yourself with that honesty and that charity?

The promise of the gospel, and the invitation of this eucharist, is that we are all loved, all welcome, all good enough for God to keep on transforming us into the people we were created to be; we are all sinners, and in God's mercy, we are all justified.

Jeremiah 14.7-10, 19-end; Luke 18.9-14

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