

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Nancy Hands. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.

Call to worship

Call to Worship: from Jeremiah 14 : You O Lord are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name.

StF 34 O worship the Lord

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URdcwd2_XAY

1 O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
with gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,
kneel and adore him the Lord is his name.

2 Low at his feet lay your burden of carefulness,
high on his heart he will bear it for you,
comfort your sorrows and answer your prayerfulness,
guiding your steps in the way that is true.

3 Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
of the poor wealth you would count as your own;

truth in its beauty and love in its tenderness
these are the offerings to bring to his throne.

4 These, though we bring them in trembling and
fearfulness,
he will accept for the name that is dear;
mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

5 O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
with gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,
kneel and adore him the Lord is his name.

John Samuel Bewley Monsell (1811-1875)

Prayers of Adoration and Confession.

Lord, as we come to worship, help us to do so with humility.
Help us to see ourselves as you do and remember before you
that we are weak without your power and lost without your
guidance. We come as our true selves: in peace or in pieces; in
hope or in hopelessness, aware of your dazzling brightness and
in awe of your holiness.

Unchanging God of yesterday, today and all our tomorrows,
we worship you. Your Word speaks to us now, as it did at the

dawn of Creation. You are beauty, truth, justice and mercy. As Father, Mother, Sustainer and Lifegiver, you chastise, forgive, transform and love all your children, created equal in your sight. We adore you.

Holy God, it is hard sometimes to believe that you love us as we are. We open our hearts to you now, confessing the bitterness and prejudice we harbour; the unfair comparisons and judgements we make about others, often claiming the moral high ground. Forgive us our arrogance and quickness to judge. Help us to recognise our lack of humility and compassion, and how far from your righteousness we are.

Gracious God, you promise us through Jesus that when we turn to you, confessing all that is wrong within us, wanting to be cleansed, you lift us up, make us new and set us on your path again. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Introduction

At our recent Preachers Meeting in the Circuit, we were invited to consider the meaning and impact of God's holiness on our lives, as human beings, as Christians and as preachers. When we do, it becomes glaringly obvious how far short of being holy and right with God we are - all of us. We are all flawed and in need of God's help, forgiveness, strength and guidance. None of us is any 'better' or more deserving than another; we all

need liberating from guilt and failure, and only Jesus can do that.

Luke 18: 9-14

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

10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11** 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.

12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

13 "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.'

14 "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."

Reflection

This is a well known parable and Luke tells us that Jesus aimed it at those who were 'confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else'. It seems clear it is about pride and prejudice, and the need for humility. So what more can we say?

The phrase that jumped out at me as I was preparing for today was, he 'stood at a distance'.

How many in our society are made to 'stand at a distance' because they are not perceived to be acceptable, or worthy, or law abiding or 'the same'? There is prejudice against them, and to be prejudiced means there is pride - of being better than the other.

October is Black History Month, when we particularly remember and celebrate success, achievement and change created by outstanding individuals, but also remembering how people of colour are still treated differently, denied opportunities and very often kept 'at a distance', as if they were inferior.

This month in the Circuit, our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion annual webinar focused on the achievements of local young black people, who would not be kept down, held back or kept at a distance. It was entitled 'Young, British and Talented: Your story, Our Inspiration' and featured Tamilore, Lydia and Jermaine: a young entrepreneur, a Pediatrician and an investment banker, all from Tottenham, from humble beginnings. All were brought up in the church and youth group and came to faith, believing that they did not have to be who society said they were, or what their schools told them they

were, but who God knew them to be. They all feel called by God, to be in the place he wants them to be, to make a difference in the world and to give him the glory.

God doesn't tolerate distance or barriers between individuals, between ethnic groups or between nations. He created us in his image and equal in his sight, and his love for his creation is limitless. God loves the paragon of virtue as much as he loves the most abject sinner, the privileged as the poor, the black as the white.

This is a hard hitting parable, which will convict us if we let it. We are all guilty of stereotyping people and making uninformed assumptions, and a lot of them are either racist, sexist or ageist. Our three young people in the webinar fought against the prejudice that assumed because they were black, from run down estates and in struggling schools that sent more black young people to prison than to university, that they would never amount to anything.

I think we similarly stereotype the Pharisee and the tax collector.

We have to remember that the picture we have of Pharisees in the New Testament is almost entirely negative. They were not all like the one in the parable. Many were good people who did

care about the welfare of others, studying the scriptures diligently and doing their best to serve God as they understood it. To put them in a modern context, we may think of a steward, who is a teacher in Junior Church, a leader of Bible Studies, a pastoral visitor, a collector for Christian Aid, organiser of the Prayer Group, a generous giver, a person really dedicated to the church. What we wouldn't give for such a person in *our* churches! The problem for Jesus though, would be if they also thought they were the bees knees and a cut above everyone else because they were so worthy and active for the Lord!

The hearers of Jesus' story would think the Pharisee had every right to have a sense of pride and to pray aloud in the Temple. But we, hearing it, know Jesus' view of him, so we tut tut and see how haughty and superior he is and instantly dislike him.

And then we have the tax gatherer. For a Jew in Jesus' day to be collaborating with the Romans and immorally squeezing his own countrymen for money they didn't have, was about as bad as it could get. In Palestine, far away from Rome, the local tax gatherer could charge whatever he liked and keep the surplus. As long as Caesar's army was financed, roads were built, courts ran and governors were paid, questions were not asked and so extortion was commonplace. But we know nothing of his background or weakness of character: whether he had any

positive role models growing up; what pressure was put on him by the Romans and what incentives may have been given. Of course, he was ostracised, hated and despised. He was not a good Jew and not even a good man. Should he even have been at the Temple, they might think. Our equivalent might be a loan shark, targeting the desperate, or a scammer, taking advantage of trusting vulnerable people, and robbing them of life savings. We despise them. But should such a person wake up to themselves, see the harm they are doing, repent and turn to God for help, I think we know his response.

Where does our sympathy lie as we read this, I wonder: with the Pharisee, haughty and self-righteous, but law abiding and decent, and a contributor to society, or the tax collector: morally corrupt, but recognising what sort of person he had become?

In 1 Samuel 16 we read, 'The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart'. God knows our motives, irrespective of our parentage, lifestyle, words or deeds. If we look at the prayer of these two men, the Pharisee wasn't actually praying to God, he was making a statement to God about his worthiness, as to an equal and establishing his superior position to whoever might hear. In fact, he was praising himself. The other man, though, was so aware of his

sin and how far he had fallen from grace, he didn't have the words. He couldn't even raise his eyes to heaven; all he could do was plead for mercy. He knew the gulf between him and God's holiness, and he knew who to turn to for help. He wanted to change.

And we are told that it was the sinner who went home closer to God than the 'good' man.

The hard lesson for us is that our sense of fairness and justice is very different to God's. Our standards and judgements are influenced by our society and how we are brought up; our capacity for love and acceptance is conditional on what we decide is deserved and merited. The extra dimension of this parable is maybe the realisation that we are both the Pharisee and the tax collector; there is not a clear definition between good and bad and all of us are a mixture of both. We *are* thankful we are not like the scoundrels who are beyond the pail; that we live fairly decent lives and don't break the law. We are probably secretly proud of being 'good' people. But there are times we know we are complete failures; that we have let God down again; that we have fallen into the same trap that we have confessed so many times before; that we do and say what we criticise in others; when there are no words but 'Lord, have mercy'.

When we acknowledge the holiness of God, we see how small and weak and sinful we are. Comparing ourselves to someone else is fatuous. Our expectations and judgement of others, leads us to the sin of dismissal and condemnation. We want mercy for ourselves, and our version of justice for them. We sin when we maintain any barriers because of race, age, gender, orientation, religion, education or status; when we think we are better than we are; when we add superiority and hypocrisy to our vices. Nobody is too good to need forgiveness nor too bad to be forgiven.

James Truslow Adams, a 19th century American writer and historian wrote, 'There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it ill behoves any of us to find fault with the rest of us.' Revd Jesse Jackson said, 'Never look down on someone unless you're helping them up.'

When God looks at us he loves us, whoever we are. His love is not rationed according to how well we behave. He wants authenticity and honesty from us, our love and dependence on him, and our connectedness with each other. Our righteousness can not be earned, but depends entirely on his mercy and grace.

There is hope for both the tax collector and the Pharisee; both can be transformed by the love of God, if they turn to Jesus

and choose to live his way. The disciple Matthew was a tax collector when Jesus chose him to be one of his closest friends. Paul was the strictest of arrogant Pharisees, and yet Jesus chose him to be the most influential apostle and pastor throughout the Roman Empire. Both of them had to learn that Jesus' way was one of humility, service and love for all. We have to drop our stereotypes, prejudices, self-sufficiency and judgement; close the distance between us and be a help not a hindrance to each other.

We began our worship with Jeremiah reminding us that God is in the midst of us and that he calls us by name. Perhaps we should repeat that to ourselves every day of our lives. It will humble us, whoever we are and whatever we have done. God wants us for his own. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

The response to 'Your kingdom come', is '*your will be done*'.
Let us pray.

Thank you gracious God, for all your goodness to us and for your constant love. In that love, we bring our concerns for ourselves, the church and the world.

Lord, lead us down your straight and narrow path. Help us to live out our lives, our hopes and our attitudes, constantly renewed by you, that we might learn the humility of Christ and value others equally as your children.

Your kingdom come, *your will be done*.

Give us courage to work and pray for the renewing of this torn and battered world, that the vision of your kingdom of wholeness, peace and unity may bring justice to all. Soften the hardened hearts of autocratic world leaders, that violence might end and love prevail. Strengthen the Church and all people of faith to speak out for the disregarded and stand up for the right.

Your kingdom come, *your will be done*.

Enable us to influence attitudes in our own communities, to make them kinder, more welcoming places. May we be people of hope and tolerance, to help lift those in despair, listen to the lonely, befriend the friendless and foster integrity and care.

Your kingdom come, your will be done.

As we think of those we know to be in special need today, we ask you to be with those who are ill or sad, anxious or

bereaved; for those traumatised or homeless, or alone. Heal, uplift, comfort and reassure them, we pray.

Your kingdom come, *your will be done*.

Lord, in you all things are made new. You are in the midst of us and you know our every need. In you, we can become the people you intend us to be. Bless us we pray and fill us with new life in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

As we pray the Lord's prayer together, please use the words most familiar to you, in whatever language or version.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

StF 666 Master speak!

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raPJHiezEhw>

Master, speak! Thy servant heareth,
Waiting for Thy gracious word,

Longing for Thy voice that cheereth
Master, let it now be heard.
I am list'ning, Lord, for Thee;
What hast Thou to say to me?

Speak to me by name, O Master,
Let me know it is to me;
Speak, that I may follow faster,
With a step more firm and free,
Where the Shepherd leads the flock
In the shadow of the Rock!

Master, speak! though least and lowest,
Let me not unheard depart;
Master, speak! for oh, Thou knowest
All the yearning of my heart.
Knowest all its truest need;
Speak! and make me blest indeed.

Master, speak! and make me ready,
When Thy voice is truly heard,
With obedience glad and steady,
Still to follow every word
I am listening, Lord, for Thee:
Master, speak, oh, speak to me!

Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879)

Blessing

As we conclude this time of worship, we bless each other in the words of The Grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and for evermore, Amen.

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