

Trinity XI Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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Kids these days have the most amazing thumbs. I wonder, sometimes, if God gave us the opposable thumb, because he thought, “Someday, they will have to text message on small phones.” Now, if I know about text messaging, it is probably already passé and out of style. While 99% of it seems recreational, those short texts can be a helpful way of communicating small points: Get milk, Let’s do coffee at the café, Don’t forget the meeting. What this will do to the English language is a little scary, as already LOL, which means “laugh out loud,” and IMHO, which means “in my humble opinion,” are becoming part of regular, written and spoken English.

Well, the Prayer of the Publican is a bit like a text message, with the terse and abbreviated form of a text message, the contemporary heir to the telegram. The Publican prays, “Gbm tms,” which means, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” His prayer is just

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one phrase: “Be merciful to me.” The rest is address and signature.

To: God, from: a Sinner.

Jesus spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others. And today, he does the same! Before we too quickly identify ourselves with the penitent publican, let’s see ourselves in the uncomplimentary mirror of the proud Pharisee. Notice the two things we are told: he was self-righteous, and he looked down on others. These two are intimately connected, and often this despising of others is the main sign or symptom of an inner self-righteousness.

They despised others. Perhaps they thought others beneath them, because they had not achieved the same level of holiness. Those others were extortioners, unjust, and adulterers. But the Pharisees were careful to avoid those things, and to commit to fasting and tithing besides.

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This self-righteousness before God leads to despising others. You hear it in our day, in all kinds of excuses for avoiding the work and expense of mercy and compassion. Contempt of others stems from proud impenitence.

The point of the Parable is to recognize ourselves in the fictional Pharisee, to recognize how we look at ourselves and at others, in his pride and contempt. How hard it can be for us, here on a Sunday at church, who give and attend so regularly, to recognize ourselves in that Pharisee and his prayer! How hard it can be for us to recognize our own prejudices, snobbishness, callousness and nastiness, in his regard for the man he calls “this Publican”.

The Pharisee welcomes the Publican to the Temple and to Prayer, with the lack of warmth and enthusiasm for which Anglicans are so often rightly known. And sadly, many a Publican, many a broken man and sinner woman, have felt the look of a Pharisee in

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our Church, or have heard the self-righteous mutterings of the religious, and gone elsewhere to find a house of Prayer.

A few years back, I wanted desperately to change a Church motto and sign to read simply: “We don’t think we’re better than other people.” Because, you know, this is the most common perception of Christians in our culture, that we think we’re better than everyone else. Well, self-righteousness is not the distinguishing mark of a Christian, humility is.

The Pharisee makes two mistakes: he is blind to his own faults, and he is blind to the grace of God. First of all, he underestimates or even denies his own faults, his own need for forgiveness and healing. He compares himself with others and pats himself on the back. Second, he does not recognize the grace and help of God in his life. His prayer is not a thanksgiving but a boast, and I’ve heard the same boast in many a Christian testimony.

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How we look to God - that is the subject of the Gospel and of Jesus' parable. And we are meant to be surprised that the holy and religious fellow is rejected and demoted, and the scandalous sinner is received and promoted.

The Pharisee is self-righteous, self-sufficient, and self-justifying. He has no problems with self-esteem, but he is not so highly esteemed in God's eyes. For the Christian's self-esteem is grounded in the esteem of God, and in the unshakeable and undeniable truth of that, which we know in the cross and death of Jesus Christ. The Christian's self-esteem is grounded in the mercy of God.

The message of self-righteous presumption and of self-loathing despair are the same - that who we are and what we've done matter the most, ultimately and finally. But neither my faults nor my achievements, how little or much I or you think of them, have the

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final word. Rather, it is the grace of God which matters most. What is this Gospel of grace? It tells us that, what we've done and left undone, doesn't matter supremely or finally. What matters supremely and finally, is God's grace. It is not how we look to ourselves or to one another, but how we look to God, that matters. This is the Gospel, the Good News of our Salvation, by grace through faith, the Good News that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again the third day. The Tradition of the Church is this Gospel and its faithful handing on.

The Tradition, then, is not a matter of small details or particulars. The Christian tradition is this earliest Creed, and not only that, but holds out that this is a matter of first importance: First of all, Christ died for our sins. So the Prayer of the Publican resounds throughout our Liturgy. Lord, have mercy upon us, we acknowledge our sins, have mercy upon us. And we come, not

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presuming and trusting in our own righteousness, but only in God's great and many mercies.

What a wonderful title there is to that prayer that we use at Communion, the Prayer of Humble Access. In the Parable of Jesus, it is the humility of the Publican which is contrasted with the Pride of the Pharisee. And his parable teaches the truth Mary celebrates, "He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek."

It is the humility, the willing humiliation, of Jesus Christ, which is our salvation. And we think today of how his humility must become ours. The word *humility* comes from *humus*, a word we still use, which means earth. To be humble means, then, to be earthy, to remember that we are but dust, to recognize that we are creatures, frail children of dust and as feeble as frail. Humility means an

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honest and true self-knowledge and awareness. To know ourselves as sinners is not the result of considering ourselves in the light of others' lives and conduct. Rather, it is to consider ourselves in the light of God, our Creator, and his will and laws, and in the light of the person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ. The Pharisee compared himself to the Publican, but the Publican did not compare himself to the Pharisee. Rather, the Publican stood before the Holy and Merciful God. Humility has to do with truth, a truth about ourselves which we can only know when we know the Holiness of God.

Humility is to know and own our creaturehood and our faults, and so to confess our sins, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." The Publican's prayer might be translated more literally, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." The Greek language of the New Testament makes clear, that his only concern when it comes to sin, is his own. This is why we, in humility, esteem others better than

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ourselves, because we know no one's sins and faults better than our own.

But the other and often-neglected side of humility, is to know and attribute all that is good in us, to the Source of all Goodness: by the grace of God, I am what I am. The flip side of humility is to attribute all that is good in us, any good we do or are, to the work and power of God in us. Notice in the Epistle, how Paul attributes his defects to himself, and his good deeds to God. Humility means that we give thanks to God for the good we are, and the good we do. By the grace of God, I am what I am, and by the grace of God, I do what I do. St. Paul reminds us elsewhere, "What have you, that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"

Now, this humility is the distinguishing mark of a Christian. It expresses itself in penitence and gratitude before God, and in love

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and service to our neighbour. Penitence and Gratitude before God, seeking his mercy and thanking him for his grace, this is where we belong. And that honesty about ourselves will make us more loving and caring people.

Humility will make us generous, in our esteem of others and in caring for them. In humility, count others better than yourselves. Humility will make us generous. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Amen.