

Parable 2: The Pharisee and the tax collector

St Mary's church

Trinity 2

Last month I went on a course about hospital chaplaincy, and we were each asked to bring along a copy of our CV, so they could give us some advice about how best to present ourselves if and when we applied for jobs. Now, I haven't actually applied for a job for years, and it took me quite a long time even to retrieve a copy of my CV, let alone work out how to open the document, having changed my computer two or three times since then. The person who stared back at me was very much a child of the last century, when CVs were supposed to fit on one side of A4, give only the most factual of information (suppressing all the unproductive bits of your life and certainly not giving away anything about your marital

status or how many children you might have) – and above all, be modest. Now I'm having to drag myself kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century. I'm expanding all the information, giving it in reverse date order, explaining how spending several months sitting in front of the TV could actually have given me useful insights into media manipulation and the psychology of advertising, and horror of horrors, inserting a text box *right at the top* telling everybody what a wonderful person I am! A whole paragraph of 'look how good I am at doing that' and 'aren't I wonderful for being like this'. It doesn't seem to matter any more what you can do, as long as you do it 'with attitude'...

Well, I may have cringed at having to 'talk myself up', but it would be familiar territory for our Pharisee in today's reading. You can see just by looking at the picture that this is a Pharisee With Attitude. There he is in his flamboyant

garments – blue, red, yellow and purple – with his designer shoes and his smart turban. He's standing against a very elaborate background, a curtain with rich embroidery and what look like gold tassels at the bottom, and at his side there is a golden bowl, presumably for alms, and what looks to me like a lampstand. Perhaps the author of the picture wanted to suggest that here was somebody who was very unlikely to hide their light under a bushel... And he's quite literally on a pedestal; taking the moral high ground, so to speak. (All that gold is, incidentally, fabulous when the sun shines through the window, as it did the other day when I came into church for a spot of private study.)

The Pharisee is pointing to the golden bowl, presumably making it clear how much money he's giving away. He's got his back to the other man, the tax-collector, or 'publican' as he was called in the old translation, but with

his other hand he's waving him away with a dismissive gesture. Look at this poor wretch, it says quite clearly. It reminds us of that other parable Jesus told about a Pharisee; in that story the Pharisee boasts about how much money he's stuffed into his Gift Aid envelope, while the old lady who's too poor to pay tax has just put the whole week's housekeeping into the plate.

The two stories are not a million miles away from each other. Unlike the widow, the tax-collector may well have a fairly sizeable income – tax-collectors made their money by charging people more than they actually owed, then pocketing the difference – but the key to the contrast lies in the *attitude* of the various figures. Everything underlines the contrast between the Pharisee and the tax-collector in this window. The tax-collector is set against the background of the natural world – there's a tree behind him, I'm not sure what kind it is, but perhaps it alludes to

the tree of life. (Certainly it's interesting that the border of this window has a design of grapes and vine leaves, another motif taken from the natural world that has profound symbolic significance; while the flowers around the edge of the window are in the same colours as the Pharisee's clothes and each one has a gold crown.) The clean-shaven tax-collector is standing at a lower level than the Pharisee, and is dressed much less ostentatiously, in a short tunic with bare feet and head. His cap is in his hand – he's obviously taken it off as a sign of respect – and I do wonder if he's actually taken his shoes off, too (because he's certainly wealthy enough to have shoes) as a sign of recognition that he's on holy ground. His head is bowed, and his hand is on his heart: as the inscription around the picture tells us: 'The publican smote upon his breast, saying God be merciful to me, a sinner.'

So the Pharisee is standing there saying 'You must just be so pleased with me, God, so proud to have high-achieving me as part of your team; I've met all our annual targets, done an excellent job of chairing the PCC and taken a firm line with the riffraff who think they can come in without a membership card and a yearly subscription'; while the tax-collector, who can hardly get the words out at all, is saying, 'Oh God, I'm just so worthless, so worthless...'

As Janet was telling us last week, a parable is a teaching story that has a much broader application than the details of the story would suggest. This one asks the question, Where does our confidence lie? The Pharisee puts his trust in himself. He knows he's wealthy, knows he's competent, knows he makes a difference. And he does; there's no getting away from it. As one of the commentaries I was reading on this passage suggests, 'To say we have a lot of

Pharisees in our churches [...] is not necessarily a bad thing. Pharisees make good elders, stewards, or deacons. They are the ones who do the work of the church and provide the financial support necessary to support religious institutions. Pharisees were devoted to God and righteousness, and most of their faults were the result of overstriving for holiness [...] Their fundamental problem was that religion became an end rather than a means. In modern terms we can become so busy playing church and being religious that we neglect being Christian in the world.'

I think the trouble with the Pharisee's attitude is that it assumes our times are in our own hands, rather than God's. That everything about us is the result of our own efforts and achievements. And it leaves out of account the sudden reversals of fortune that are brought about by illness, unemployment, family breakdown, a change in

government. For much of my life I've been haunted by the thought of those wealthy, respectable Jewish families in Germany, Austria and elsewhere - professional, successful, well-connected - who suddenly found themselves in the 1930s stripped of their assets, their social standing and their passports, reduced to destitution, or worse, by an unalterable fact of birth.

St Paul helps us to take the next step, however: 'If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens'. That attitude is echoed in a diary entry written by Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman who did lose everything she had and was incarcerated in Auschwitz. In 1943 she wrote, 'All I wanted to say is this: the misery here is quite terrible, and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire, and time

and again it soars straight from my heart – I can't help it, that's just the way it is, like some elementary force – the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and every fresh horror we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves.'

The tax-collector hasn't quite reached the point where he can articulate anything like this: he's just overwhelmed by a sense of his own inadequacy. But he's put his trust in God, rather than himself, and just as St Paul suggests, 'grace may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.' Knowing that God has heard him, and in hearing him has forgiven him everything, the tax-collector can only be thankful. He has nothing of his own to fall back on, no sense of his own importance, and so he knows that he

receives everything at the hands of God. The Pharisee has Attitude; but the tax-collector has Gratitude.

I know where I'd rather be in this picture.