

The parable in our New Testament reading tonight may be familiar to you. It was certainly familiar to the carvers and masons of the Minster, for they illustrated it in stone in the North Nave aisle. There a very proper holy person is in an attitude of pious prayer, and next to them is someone grovelling as if burrowing into the ground. Go closer to the person in their piety and look at them from underneath and you'll see a depiction of the devil. When you look at the person's face on all you can see is the devil's ears. The stonework tells it beautifully: the person who looks most pious and correct is the one in the most danger. The groveller is secure. The satisfied will get a rude awakening.

Let's be clear. No one listening was expecting the punchline. In the parable the Pharisee is not saying anything unusual then, however much we might think he is showing off. Not only was it felt that those who had become Pharisees must automatically have been blessed by God, but such people could take a careful look at the way they had obeyed the law and the ways in which they had made atonement, or payment, for any ways in which they had failed, and then calculate that, all things being added up, they were bound to be in a right relationship with God. Certainly St Paul used to think in that way about himself.

That's why the Pharisee compares himself to the grovelling tax collector. God has made the Pharisee good, not bad. So, carefully looking at himself, and then measuring himself up against the tax collector, he can't be anything other than sorted, justified, righteous. "Just look at what I am and what I do. I'm fine." And in those terms the tax collector is clearly going the other way. He serves a hated occupying power, colludes with a system where corruption brings personal rewards, lines his own pocket, and by consorting with the Romans goes against the law and against his people. Measured against the Pharisee he could not hope in a million years that, in God's eyes, he might be accepted. It all makes perfect sense.

Which is why Jesus tells the parable. Because the things which make perfect sense to us are not that sensible when looked at through God's eyes. The Pharisee is actually saying "look at me". His trust is in himself, in what he is, and what he does, and in what he is not. "Thank God I'm not a tax collector". It's so easy to compare ourselves to others. "I might snaffle the odd thing from work I shouldn't, but at least I haven't stolen thousands of pounds." "I might have said some bad things to my friend, but at least I haven't stabbed anyone." And so on. Jesus says that this is not good enough. If we put our trust in what we are and in what we do or haven't done we are in for trouble. Because, compared to God's standards, God's righteousness, no one measures up. The Pharisee has forgotten what true righteousness, true goodness, looks like, and is settling for an imitation. The Pharisee has forgotten to need God. It's almost as if God needs people like him.

This parable is about attitude, not achievement. Jesus is not saying that we should continue to act in a bad way after we have asked for forgiveness, and he is not saying that a disciplined life of giving, praying and fasting is a bad thing. He's saying that, when we come in front of God face to face, whatever we have said or done will not be enough. It will be our desire to find mercy, rescue, forgiveness and healing in and through Christ which God will look at favourably. The purpose of disciplines and routines and spiritual practices is not to make us feel good about ourselves, and it is not about piling up righteousness

points like airmiles to guarantee a place in heaven. Such disciplines are about reminding ourselves how much we need God. Setting aside time to pray, foregoing a meal when we fast, or giving something up and giving the money saved to a good cause will not impress God one iota. But discovering our need of God as we do that, uncovering the desire of the heart which is restless until it finds its rest in God....that enables God to say that we are being saved through him.

Our Christian life starts with us acknowledging our need, asking God to fill us and forgive us, and being pleased then to be Jesus's friend. This Lent may we draw closer to God, in prayer and action, and rejoice that in Christ God knows our needs and will make us new.