

There is a car sticker, popular in the States which reads "Jesus loves you. But I'm his favourite". I was introduced to this as part of a discussion which erupted on Facebook when someone wondered whether they could preach a sermon called "Jesus loves you. But I think you're a [insert rude word of your choice]". I think both of these phrases have something to say about our Gospel reading today – the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

The parable may be very 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 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. In the parable the Pharisee is not saying anything unusual in his own culture and context, 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. It would be simplistic to say this was a mechanical thing, but it was absolutely normal to be able to say "I'm a Pharisee. I've obeyed the law. God has not caused me to become poor or a sinner. Therefore I am fine. Thank you very much."

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.

Who would you prefer to sit next to in church? The smartly dressed person at ease with themselves, who gives off the impression that all is well and it's a privilege for the church to have them there? Or the scruffily dressed person with manifest needs and problems who doesn't stop weeping and saying sorry? Well, it's hard to see into the deepest depths of people's souls, but Jesus says here loud and clear that, if a person is trusting in themselves and is quite pleased with themselves, there's no room for God. If a person knows that, whatever they do, it won't be good enough, and that nothing they can do in themselves will change God's mind, then that makes all the room God needs to do something amazing.

This parable is about attitude, not achievement. I don't think Jesus is saying that we should continue to act in a bad way after we have asked for forgiveness, and I don't think he's 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, nothing we are or have done will do. So our Christian life starts with acknowledging our need, asking God to fill us and forgive us, and being pleased then to be Jesus's friend. The only person we should judge is ourself. That done, with God's grace and forgiveness as our only security, we can then live a good life.

And we can watch out for the kind of attitude that makes us look down on others, and judge them. Perhaps there's another car sticker we should find. "Jesus loves you. At the moment I think you're a [insert rude word of choice]. Maybe I should look again."