



This is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it!

Crown him with many crowns,
the Lamb upon his throne.
Hark! how the heavenly anthem drowns
all music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing
of him who died for thee,
and hail him as thy matchless King
through all eternity.

Crown him the Son of God,
before the worlds began;
and ye who tread where he has trod,
crown him the Son of Man,
who every grief has known
that wrings the human breast,

Loving God, with gladness I offer you this worship.

Help me to remember that you are with me always. Help me to pray to you in faith,
to sing your praise with gratitude, and listen for your word with eagerness;
through Christ my Lord. ***Amen.***

Holy God,
to you alone belong glory, honour and praise.
I delight to join with the hosts of heaven as I worship.
You alone are worthy of adoration from every mouth,
and every tongue shall sing your praise.
You create the earth by your power;
you save the human race in your mercy,
and renew it through your grace.
To you, loving God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be all glory, honour and praise
now and forever.

Loving God,
I have sinned against you in what I have thought, said, and done.
I have not loved you with my whole heart;
I have not loved my neighbours as myself.
I am truly sorry and turn away from what is wrong.
Forgive me for the sake of your Son,
Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Since the beginning we have been assured that
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
And this is his gracious word: 'Your sins are forgiven.'

Thanks be to you, all gracious and almighty God.

Reading : Luke 18: 9-14

and takes and bears them for his own,
that all in him may rest.

Crown him the Lord of love;
behold his hands and side —
rich wounds, yet visible above,
in beauty glorified.
All hail, Redeemer, hail!
for thou hast died for me;
thy praise and glory shall not fail
throughout eternity.

Matthew Bridges and Godfrey Thring **STF347**

Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. Two archetypal characters that would have been instantly recognisable to his audience. Were Jesus phrasing the parable for the first time in our hearing he might well have said, "There was a bishop and a pimp...and both went up to church to pray....." Straight away we would recognise the type and the associated assumptions based on very reliable likely evidence. The bishop: a man of decency, good works, and a seasoned familiarity with the business of praying. The pimp: a man of dubious character, likely a thug, and familiar only with living off the immoral earnings of the victims of his wickedness.

From what we know of the Pharisees, there's a very good possibility that everything in this particular Pharisee's prayer was true. And according to the Law's standards, this Pharisee was outstandingly exceptional. As the Pharisee said, 'he was not like other men'. The religious Law required the Pharisee to fast only once a year; well, very religious folk fasted once a week; but the Pharisee in Jesus' parable fasts twice a week! We are also told that he tithed the whole of his income. Under the Law a tithe was only required on produce: this Pharisee paid it on everything. Even the form of the Pharisee's prayer was perfectly in order. Every day the faithful Jew, Pharisee or not, thanked God that he was not a woman, not a Samaritan, not a Jew living outside the law, and so on. So, the Pharisee's prayer was more than legitimate. The Pharisee had chosen to set himself apart in order to live the most faithful life possible as his faith understood it. He was absolutely right: this Pharisee was not like other men. To the audience of Jesus that day this Pharisee would have received much nodding of approval as Jesus described him at prayer and it would have been admirable approval. When Jesus first began to tell his parable, it is very likely that he was met with open mouths and wide-eyed expressions on the faces of his audience at the suggestion that a tax collector would have gone up to the Temple to pray. How would you react to the idea that a pimp went to church to pray? Well, I suppose it's possible if he's just been diagnosed with a terminal disease or some other villain is after his blood. Maybe that might drive him to prayer in a church! We expect a bishop to be a man of prayer, but a pimp?

By common consensus tax collectors were the lowest of low. First of all, Palestine was a country occupied by a brutal and merciless pagan super-power known collectively as Rome. The Romans also taxed the people of the lands they conquered. They didn't collect the taxes themselves. They got others to do the dirty work and didn't care how the collection of those taxes was enforced. Anyone could be a tax collector. All you had to do was tender for the franchise. This is how it was done: the Roman authorities decided on a sum of money they wanted to raise in taxes from a particular area and then they took bids for the job. The lowest bid won the job. So, where's the profit margin? Well, since the Romans didn't care HOW the taxes were collected the tax collectors could whatever 'margin' they wanted. They were actually thugs and enforcers making their living extorting money from their fellow citizens on behalf of the occupying power. The tax collectors and their gang members routinely engaged in murder, torture, and beatings as part of their living. Imagine a cross between the Mafia and an outlaw biker gang. So, like our pimp, a tax collector was the last person you'd expect to find praying in a church unless it was for some pretty selfish inconvenience or personal danger.

So, what's the point of the story? In the religious sweepstakes who would you go for: the bishop or the pimp? Think about that. If you were a betting man or woman, who would you put your money on? Jesus' listeners would certainly be rooting for the Pharisee. Like him or not, his was the best, the most reliable religious game in town. Ask the question, "who is God going to favour?" and the expected answer would be: "the Pharisee."

But Jesus turns the expected and accepted wisdom on its head. To the surprise of everyone, it was the tax collector on whom rested God's favour. Why? Because his prayer was more proper? No. Because he's going to repent and live differently? No. Because of the depth of his sin? No. It was simply because he put his trust in God. In Jesus' eyes the only thing - the only important thing - that separates these two is the degree to which they are willing to rely solely and totally on the grace and mercy of God. What about us? Do we come to church and think coming to church makes a difference to God? Do we serve on some community board or church committee and think that makes a difference to God? Do we give our offerings, or sing in a choir, or teach Sunday School, or go to bible study and think that somehow these things puts God in our debt? If there is any hint of any of that then we are no different to the Pharisee in Jesus' parable.

Now before you get mad and rise up to stone me with the hymn books in the pews..... listen to what I am not saying. I am not saying that the moral quality of the life the Pharisee led was the same as that of the tax collector. I am not saying that God is unconcerned about the way we live, day by day. I am not saying that God is unconcerned about the way we live our repentance. If the tax collector went home and lived just the same way as he had before that might well throw some doubt on the validity of his prayer.

What I am saying about the Pharisee and the tax collector - and by close extension about you and me - is that the greatest danger we can face, spiritually, is pride. Nothing will create a sense of separation from God and other people more surely than pride. Once we start thinking how lucky God is to have us on the team or that we are so much better than others or that the quality of our spiritual life depends solely on our efforts that's when we are on a very slippery slope.

The real significance of all this is the emphasis on that ever-approaching future which is our present. The reason the Pharisee was rejected, and the tax collector hailed as right with God is the way in which they were either stuck in the past or open to the future which is God's today. The Pharisee in the parable was stuck in a past of which he was so proud and yet in which was so lost. For the Pharisee was totally focussed on past accomplishment, an achievement, a critical series of moments in the past. He was operating in the present completely on the basis of what's being seen in the rear-view mirror, instead of out in front of the car. The tax collector in the parable, on the other hand, is not looking at the rear-view mirror to find where his connection with God is. He's looking in front of him. He prays for mercy, for forgiveness, for a fresh start. And there it is. Because it is always there. New every day.

There is a poster up in my friend's house that says: "Please be patient, God isn't finished with me yet." It's important to have a rear-view mirror. It is a joyful thing to be able to reflect on God's goodness and presence in the past. But getting stuck there is the way that leads to dying. The tax collector epitomises the way we should approach God: with an empty, open hand. Every day with God is new. Every day has new possibilities, new opportunities. Every day, there can be healing, and a step forward. Every day we can be more than we were hitherto. Thanks be to God, who makes each day for us a new day.

THE CHURCH'S PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Blessèd are you, eternal God,
to be praised and glorified forever.

Hear the prayers of your people everywhere
as we pray for your holy catholic Church:
make us all one, that the world may believe.

Grant that every member of the Church
may truly and humbly serve you:
that the life of Christ may be revealed in us.

Strengthen all who minister in Christ's name:
give them courage to proclaim your Gospel.

Inspire and lead those who hold authority in the nations of the world:
guide them and all people in the way of justice and peace.

Make us alive to the needs of our community:
help us to share each other's joys and burdens.

Look with kindness on our homes and families:
grant that your love may grow in our hearts.

Inspire us to have compassion on those who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble:
in your presence may they find their strength.

We remember those who have died:
Father, into your hands we commend them.

We praise you for all your saints
who have entered your eternal glory:
bring us all to share in your heavenly kingdom.

[Personal concerns]...

Heavenly Father,
you have promised to hear
what we ask in the name of your Son:
we pray you to accept and answer our prayers,
not as we ask in our ignorance,
nor as we deserve in our sinfulness,
but as you know and love us in your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

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.**

Lord of creation, to you be all praise!
Most mighty your working,
most wondrous your ways!
Your glory and might are beyond us to tell,
and yet in the heart of the humble you dwell.

Lord of all power, I give you my will,
in joyful obedience your tasks to fulfil.
Your bondage is freedom; your service is
song;
and, held in your keeping, my weakness is
strong.

Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,
rich truth that surpasses my knowledge to
find;

Jack Copley Winslow

StF 449

***The blessing of God,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among, and remain with, people everywhere, always. Amen.***

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what eye has not seen and what ear has not
heard
is taught by your Spirit and shines from your
word.

Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
I praise and adore you for all you impart,
your love to inspire me, your counsel to guide,
your presence to shield me, whatever betide.

Lord of all being, I give you my all;
if I should disown you, I stumble and fall;
but, led in your service your word to obey,
I'll walk in your freedom to the end of the
way.