



Revd Ro's Reflection on
The 19th Sunday after Trinity
Proper 25 Year C

2 Timothy 4.6-8,16-18

Luke 18.9-14

I am rereading (once again) that wonderful book, 'The Dean's Watch' by Elizabeth Gouge. I first came across this novel some fifty five years ago when we read it as a class text at school. I can remember even as a twelve year old what a profound effect it had on me and my faith. Our gospel story of the Pharisee and the tax collector brought this novel to mind. The dean and Miss Montague, an old lady who lives in the cathedral close, are firm friends; both are elderly and have a deep affection and understanding of each other. They also have similar ideas about the nature and love of God. They both however, have a sense of their own unworthiness, the dean sees himself as a failure because his great intellect gets in the way of his preaching sermons which connect with people. He also has a formidable presence which tends to frighten people off and so he cannot do what he longs to, 'to serve those whom Christ called the little ones.' He has achieved greatness as the world sees it, as a famous headmaster, and now dean of the cathedral city. He is a man who has a great desire to serve and to do good. He is totally humble as is Miss Montague. Actually both he and Miss Montague are anything but unworthy. They both know God's great love for all his people and can rest in the assurance that they are loved by him however unworthy they feel. As the dean puts it one can only pray and try again.

By contrast Emma Peabody, the sister of the clockmaker whom the dean befriends, considers herself a virtuous woman; she, in her own words, attends church, puts money in her missionary box and 'takes no sugar in her tea during lent.' The trouble is, though she does not realise it, is she is totally without love or kindness. 'The Dean's Watch' is a wonderful and thought provoking novel and I thoroughly recommend it.

The connection between the characters in this parable and this novel is obvious. The Pharisees were a sect who had considerable influence over the people. They were generally opposed to the more upper class Sadducees. Often however in the gospel stories they appear united in their opposition

to Jesus. Paul himself was a Pharisee and was a leader of those who persecuted the early followers of Jesus. However there are notable exceptions like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

Notice the first line of this passage; this is not just a general observation by Jesus.

⁹ 'He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:'

It is addressed specifically to those who thought themselves better than others and condemned them as unworthy. I guess this story gives rise to the phrase 'holier than thou.'

¹⁰ 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector.'

Tax collectors were not looked on favourably; some were seen as collaborators because they collected taxes for the Roman occupiers. Others of course were indeed corrupt, they were swindlers who made a nice living for themselves by charging too much and therefore making the burdens of the poor even heavier. Yet Jesus sees the potential in the tax collector Matthew. He calls him to be a disciple. Matthew leaves his tax booth; he gives up his corrupt life to follow his Lord. This is an example of true repentance, acknowledging sin, making reparation, asking forgiveness and turning to Jesus. We also note that Jesus associated with tax-gatherers and sinners. They were often aware of their failings and he says, are actually 'nearer to God' than the self-righteous people who thought they were sinless and had it all right with God thank you very much. Jesus' comment is ironic when he says,

⁷ 'Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.' (Luke 15)

We all need repentance; we all need to understand our own shortcomings and those who think they don't should look again!

Pharisees were advocates of the law and thought that if they kept the law down to the tiniest detail that would make everything fine. They, like Emma Peabody, are concerned with detail and are blind to the fundamental truth about the God of love and about forgiveness.

¹² 'I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

They are self-absorbed and care little about the needs of other people. This story illustrates how quick they are to condemn the failings of others to make themselves more worthy. The Pharisee is putting himself on a pedestal. The more he says about how bad others are, the better he thinks by contrast, he will appear in God's eyes. Jesus' opinion of those who criticise others is made clear in Matthew 7,

^{7.1} 'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.'

The Pharisee in the story fits into this category exactly. So often we can fall into this trap. The Native Americans' have a wise saying about this which goes something like this, 'Do not judge a man until you have walked for a year in his moccasins.' It is good advice. This does not mean that we do not stand up for what we know to be right or that we do not oppose wrongdoing. Of course that is important but we need to be careful that we do not seek to justify what we do all the time to try to

get our own way and condemn others as less worthy. We all have failings. The Pharisee in this story has no humility whatsoever and doesn't even acknowledge the fact that he has sins, much less confess and repent of them. He is too busy making himself look good by comparing himself to others. The effect of his actions has the opposite effect as Jesus is quick to point out.

¹³But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

The tax collector is aware of his unworthiness; he repents of his sins and then rests in the mercy of God's love. It is he who is forgiven. The Pharisee seems to be unaware of his need for forgiveness.

¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

God is the judge who judges all with love and fairness and indeed mercy. The Pharisee thinks he has done everything right and it appears he has simply come to the Temple to parade his 'virtues' before God. It is a warning to all of us not to be self-righteous, not to think we have got it right and to condemn others. The humility that the dean and Miss Montague share is the pattern Jesus gave in his life, particularly highlighted when he washed his disciples' feet. St. Paul says,

³ 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross' (Philippians 2)

This hymn of praise is one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament and sums up the teaching of humility and service exactly. What a contrast this humility is to the behaviour of the Pharisee. It is wise to have this teaching always before us, 'I came to serve not to be served.'

In the epistle reading Paul writes to Timothy while imprisoned in Rome. He is under house arrest and is still carrying on his mission for Christ as he writes to Timothy instructing him in the faith and how to lead the fledgling church in Ephesus under difficult circumstances as we saw last week,

^{4.1} 'In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.'

Now Paul turns to himself,

⁶ 'As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come.'

Paul is conscious of the threat of impending death. It appears he has already faced his first trial. We know that Paul was arrested by the Romans and pleaded his right as a Roman citizen to be tried by the Emperor. That Emperor was Nero; Nero has become infamous for his persecution of Christians, his brutality and his immorality. Anyone less like a just judge it is hard to imagine. What's more Paul's friends have deserted him. We are reminded of the way the disciples fled in fear at Jesus' arrest and of Peter's denial. There is a huge pathos in these words,

¹⁶ 'At my first defence no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them!'

It is a terrible thing to have those you trusted turn away and leave you isolated and as in Paul's case to face danger alone. However Paul was able to defend himself and he knew that he could never be alone when his Lord Jesus and God's Holy Spirit was with him.

¹⁷ 'But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.'

For this first trial at least Paul has not been found guilty, he is free for a time to continue the work of Jesus. There are some details missed from our reading,

⁹ 'Do your best to come to me soon, ¹⁰for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. ¹²I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. ¹³When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.'

We know how fond Paul is of Timothy and here he appeals to Timothy to come to him. It appears the other 'supporters' have left him while only Luke remains loyal. I love the detail about his cloak, that sort of thing really roots this in domestic reality. Paul knows that though he may have survived the first trial his impending death can't be long delayed. However he says,

⁷ 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.'

Paul, like the dean, has done his best, against all the odds and against great persecution and adversity he has done the work of his Lord and King. His faith in his Lord has never wavered. He has spread the word of Jesus throughout the known world and others like young Timothy must now take the responsibility and carry on his work.

This tiny passage is full of metaphors; Paul will soon be poured out like a libation, like a sacrifice. In that he will follow in the footsteps of Jesus whose blood was poured out as a sacrifice to save the whole world. He says, ⁷ 'I have fought the good fight,' reminiscent of the gladiatorial arena. Indeed he has fought lifelong for his Lord. He has, like a good athlete, completed the race and will be crowned by Jesus, just as an athlete was crowned with a wreath when he had won the race.

⁸ 'From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.'

This took me back to the funeral service of Queen Elizabeth II and one of the hymns that she chose, 'Love divine all loves excelling' One line is, 'till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.' She, like Paul, had served her people and her God faithfully and with love. Her faith in the promises of Jesus was firm; it was the bedrock of her life.

Paul has done all he could to serve his Lord and now rests secure in the promise of Jesus that he will receive his reward and will be united with his Lord. Paul's faith in his 'reward' and of the reward of all who follow Jesus reminded me of a line often quoted in the 'Dean's Watch,' it is from psalm 68, 'God is the Lord by whom we escape death.'

Paul knows that Jesus is the righteous judge, unlike those before whom he has appeared. Jesus will come again to judge not just Paul but the whole world, and then those who have tried to follow in his way will be rewarded. During Advent particularly we look to the day when Jesus will come again to judge the world, and hymns like, 'Lo he comes with clouds descending,' stress this. Paul stands firm in the faith that he has done his best to humbly serve his Lord. What he says has nothing of the arrogance of the Pharisee in the gospel but, like the dean, he rests in faith in the promises of Jesus.¹⁸ 'The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.'

So Paul reiterates his belief that whatever trials he has still to go through there is no cause for fear because Jesus will stand beside him, Jesus will strengthen him and finally he will come to be with Jesus, his Lord and King. He ends typically with praise and thanksgiving to Christ.

Throughout our lives we face difficult and sometimes tragic situations. We need, like St. Paul, to rest in the knowledge that whatever we have to face we never are alone and that God's Holy Spirit will comfort and strengthen us. We know that St. Paul and all who taught the word of God could never have done it alone. That is as true today as it was then.

"Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be; let us see thy new creation perfectly restored in thee". Charles Wesley

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