

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

You And I, God: What A Team!

How embarrassing is this Pharisee! What is Jesus encouraging in us by his story? Not, certainly, the habitual contempt of Christians for Pharisees (which, ironically, perfectly echoes the Pharisee's contempt for the tax-collector). We should remember the exemplary holiness of many real-life Pharisees, known to us from Jewish writings from the same period as the Gospel. In their morality they fulfil so closely the demands Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount that one thinks they must have rejoiced to listen to him. We should also remember that Jesus' greatest apostle – Paul – was not only a Jew, but a Pharisee.

In God's Presence

Coming before God, there can be no self-righteousness in our minds. *What do you possess*, Paul asks the Corinthians, *that has not been given to you? And if it was given to you, why are you boasting as if it were your own?* This is the truth of our relationship to God, and nothing we do, using the gifts he has shared with us, can alter it; our very success is his gift, just as much as our capital inheritance is. Relating properly to God means living within this relationship, which in human terms we would have to call *unequal*. In a world that worships independence, competence, and individual self-determination this kind of talk is not at all welcome; to be told to build a world-view round it comes very hard. Jesus knew this. He gives us a contrast today: on one hand a self-assured Pharisee who relates to God almost as an equal. *You and I have done rather well*, he says. *We're on the same wave-length, unlike some others I could name.* On the other hand, a compromised, dishonoured person who deserves the contempt of his peers, and who has not even any self-respect left. The Gospel fits him, not the Pharisee, because *he knows he is poor*, and the Gospel belongs to the poor and always has done. *I came to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives*: Jesus' first sermon-text at Nazara focuses on the tax-collector, on the paralytic, the leper, the blind-halt-and-lame, the possessed. They are poor prospects for earthly greatness, but great prospects for the kingdom: they do not ask for equality with God, before they are ready to accept his grace. How does this affect me and you?

How Hard For A Rich Man

Self-sufficiency is a temporary state in which some of us may be allowed to live for a while. Some people never have it at all: they are regarded as disposable insofar as they can't defend themselves. The hard facts of the world's way are visited on them impartially, as if the rich and powerful were made so by Divine Ordinance. If they ask, *Why are you ill-treating me?* the world replies: *Because we can, and you can't do anything to stop us.* In fact the will of God is expressed quite differently, in a way only dimly perceived until Jesus came: Isaiah's suffering servant foreshadows him, but until he comes we have to say: *Who could believe what we have seen?* Jesus Christ had the nature of God, but, loosening his grasp, he emptied himself of it, and lowered himself to become what we are, and being as we are, he was humbler yet, accepting death on a Cross. This is what God has exalted, giving to an executed slave the name which is above every other name. Therefore every knee must bend before him – every head must bow, crowned, renowned, honoured, plutocratically rich, august in earthly power as they may be.

“As I Am, You Will Be”

This inscription is quite common on tombstones. It speaks with a sepulchral authority, the authority of the dead. Even the grandest individual begins to be embarrassing a few hours after death, and has to be hurried out of sight. Those who rely on their earthly standing for meaning can learn from this to re-evaluate their lives. But That isn't, for a Christian, the import of these off-putting words. We can hear the words as coming from Christ – whom death no longer dominates – and find in them, not a solemn warning of inevitable downfall, but a glorious promise in which to trust. But we have to invest everything in this promise, as St Luke has told us so often during this year of his Sunday Gospels. It is a liberating promise. In its name we can use our power and wealth in the unearthly freedom of generosity. This is unbounded joy, the royal way of Christ's oncoming Kingdom.

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