

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Pharisee, Publican

It's dangerous for us to read the Gospel without the compassion of Christ. Today's story about Pharisee and Publican is a case in point. They are, of course, symbolic figures; but if the story were to encourage an attitude of judgment and dismissiveness in us - particularly about Pharisees in general - then the story would misfire, and we'd be misled. The real Christ did not withhold his compassion, even from Pharisees; in fact there is reason to believe that the word only became a hate-word two or three generations after Jesus' death; no Pharisee is implicated in his trial or condemnation.

We Are In This Story

The subject of the story is such an intimately personal one: religious people are at risk from the cost-counting mentality displayed by the Pharisee. He is so busily religious in his outlook that he cannot help carrying the catalogue of his good deeds into the presence of God. It's natural enough. We live for God, we do our good deeds for God; what more natural, we may think, than to tell God about them? The problem, I think, is to do with our understanding of who God is. We tend to think of him as another human being, or perhaps a human being with the limitations lopped off - so a kind of superdaddy with infinite understanding and sympathy for us; but still a kind of fellow-creature, another member of the long list of beings in the universe. But God is not a fellow-being. Rather he is *the* Being, the original and only existent and self-sufficient Being; all of us depend upon him, our Creator, and therefore cannot claim to exist in the same sense that he does. It is quite improper for us to flourish our deeds in his face, as if they represented some sort of achievement of our own, about which he ought to know, and be impressed! The things we can claim to have done off our own bat are our sins. Our good deeds are the ones where God has been allowed to be active in us, which is why we are sometimes good rather than evil.

The Tax Collector

The tax collector has not much claim to honour, and he is not distracted by his good deeds. In itself this doesn't make him particularly precious. But he *has* a lively sense of his failings, and his need for God; and that means he has a high value: he belongs to that class of people the Gospel calls "the poor" - the people without a leg to stand on, who know they have nothing good of their own to show before God. Unaccountably to us, God has no problem with them. It is the ones who *do* truly have a good record, and who are relying on that to make them acceptable to

God, that he cannot be doing with. They are not accepting God's sovereignty as Creator, they do not honour God for their good deeds, but lay claim to their lives possessively, and assume they are in credit with him by some grace or power of their own. This is not true worship, it is not the true God they are praying to, but a fellow human being. It's a non-meeting.

Paid-up Members Of The Church?

The best Catholics usually have a saving sense that they can never justify themselves before God. Sometimes this is miscalled "Catholic Guilt", but it is much more respectable than that name implies. They know that the natural human urge to be right, and acceptable, and up-to-date with our commitments, cannot help us in our relations with God. We are pleasing to him, not because of our splendid deeds, but because of *his* choice, which first brought us into being. This can never be paid for by anything of ours. The relationship created for us by the sacrifice of Christ was not yet in the picture when this story was first told; but the depth of divine love was always there in its fulness. The Cross didn't create it, but showed it forth in full light. If a Jewish Pharisee had nothing to boast about to God, how much less has a Christian who knows he has received forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ?

Humility is Endless

Our business is to count God's blessings, not to keep a record of anything we have been enabled to do for him. This may protect me from being a twenty-first century high achiever who has "got a life", and who nurtures the *curriculum vitae* like a pet ewe lamb. But it may also free me from the anxieties of those who feel obliged to carve out of their being some reason for existence, some evidence of value, some excuse for being in the world. So cancel the cyanide pill and the depressive state of angst. No-one with this attitude need ever kill himself for lack of self-esteem! We belong to God, God has put us here for his own purposes, and we live in obedience to God. No-one can question him about this, because he is the Creator, the only one there is. I am profoundly grateful for this thought. It's enough for me.

Fr Philip