

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> October 2019**

*Jeremiah 14: 7 – 10, 19 – 22; Luke 18: 9 - 14*

No one likes people who are crooks or cheats. Crooks and cheats are bad people. They are unpopular because they steal our money, get the better of us, and think only of themselves. They are, “greedy, dishonest, adulterous,” as the Pharisee called them in this morning's Gospel reading when ‘Two people went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-gatherer.’ For example, said the Pharisee, this tax-gatherer here, he is a bad person.<sup>1</sup>

But it is not just crooks, cheats and tax-gatherers that people dislike, we don't like virtuous people either. Research published in 2010 by two psychologists Craig Parks and Asako Stone<sup>2</sup> shows that not only do we not like bad people, but we don't like people who are excessively nice or good, people like the Pharisee himself, who prayed regularly, fasted twice a week, and payed his tithes.

It turns out that we don't like excessively bad people because they tend to behave badly towards us, and we don't like excessively virtuous people because in comparison to them, we think that they make us look bad. We don't like bad people, and good people make us look bad. And, right there is our problem. Our problem is that we judge ourselves as good or bad in comparison to others. We think that in comparison to us, the bad people make us look good and the good people make us look bad – in comparison to us, and that is our problem.

If you want to live a good life, a life that feels abundant and blessed; a life that feels touched with a significance that is eternal; the life that God wants you to have in the Kingdom of God, then the moral of the parable we read this morning about the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer going up to the temple to pray is, do not compare yourself to other people. If you want an objective reference point to measure the value or worth or significance of your life never, ever use other people. That way lies disaster. Too many of us spend too much of our time trying to impress or feel superior to people we don't even like.

If you want to measure the value of your life – it's worth and significance, and if you want to live a life of worth and value, a life that feels that it is touched with a significance that is eternal, an abundant life as Jesus called it, then instead of looking at other people and measuring how tall you are compared to them, get down on your knees and humble yourself before God. That is the message of today's reading.

Neither the tax-collector nor the Pharisee are attractive people: one is too bad, and the other is too good for us to warm to. But, despite them both being unattractive, one of them is saved, while the other left to stew.

*It was this man, I tell you, and not the other, who went home acquitted of his sins. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*<sup>3</sup>

It is the tax-collector who is exalted not the Pharisee because the tax-collector didn't make that crucial, fundamental mistake that the Pharisee did when he went up to pray at the temple, a mistake that is described in the verse that this whole parable turns on,

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18: 10 - 11

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, September 2010

<sup>3</sup> Luke 18: 14

*"I thank thee, O God, ... that I am not like the rest of people, greedy, dishonest, adulterous; or, for that matter, like this tax-gatherer."*<sup>4</sup>

There is the Pharisee's problem, there is the thing that ruins his life, that makes him unhappy, that undermines the foundations of his exaltedness; he compared himself to others, *"I thank thee, O God, ... that I am not like the rest of people."*

When you compare yourself to others you undermine your relationship with yourself, you undermine your relationship with other people, and you undermine your relationship with God. Once these three things have happened because you compared yourself to others you are not left with very much; you are an empty shell, you have no sense of abundant life, a life of worth and value, a life that feels it has a significance that is eternal.

Now, there is a difference, of course, between comparing yourself to others, and learning from others. When you listen to a teacher, you are not comparing yourself to your teacher, you are learning from your teacher.

There is a difference, as well, between comparing yourself to others, and following others. When you look up to a mentor, or take instruction from your boss, you are not comparing yourself to whomever it is who is better placed or more experienced than you, you are following a lead.

There is a difference, too, between comparing yourself to others, and admiring others. When you fall in love with your husband or wife to-be and believe that he or she is a better person than you are, you are not comparing yourself to them, you are in love with them (unless of course, you do compare yourself to your beloved, in which case you run the risk of your love becoming self-loathing, and, in your comparing, of your marriage shrivelling).

Comparing yourself to others is something you do when you take other people as your reference point to judge how well you are doing in life, or how badly; how attractive you are, or how unattractive; what you should be achieving in life; or how you should be behaving, to take just a few examples. When you do this, when you take other people as your reference point for your life, then you undermine your relationship with yourself, you undermine your relationship with other people, and you undermine your relationship with God.

Let me tell you about Emma. Emma is an artist, and a good one; good enough that you might hang one of her paintings on your wall. She has a natural talent, a gift, but her gift is not so great that she doesn't need some guidance and instruction to make the most of her talent. So, Emma goes – I should say went – to an art class to learn from a teacher how to be a better painter.

For Emma, her art class is not just an opportunity to improve her painting, it a social opportunity as well. She goes to the class – I should say, she used to go to the class - with her best friend. And, because the art class is a social opportunity to be with her best friend, Emma sits beside her best friend in the art class. By doing so Emma is a lot less happy in her life because Emma's best friend is also the best artist in the class, she's a brilliant artist.

The art teacher noticed this quite early on after Emma and her friend started going to the art class. When Emma asked her teacher what she could do to really improve her painting, the teacher said, 'Don't sit beside the best artist in the class.' Of course, it would have been an equal folly for Emma to have then moved to sit beside the worst artist in the class.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 18: 11

Emma doesn't go to the art class anymore; in fact, she doesn't paint at all anymore really – she doesn't think she is a very good painter. Not only that, her relationship with her best friend is not as good as it could be, for she sees less of her, and is pricked by a little bit of jealousy. All because she compared herself to someone else.

If only she hadn't done that, but instead had focussed her attention on what the teacher was telling her rather than what her classmates were painting. If only she had taken as her objective reference point for her worth as an artist the teacher's opinion, and not her friend's ability. If only; then she wouldn't have fallen out love with herself (as an artist); nor would her love for her friend have been diminished by jealousy; nor would her love and respect for the art teacher been undermined by blame for his inability to improve her talent.

When your attention is misdirected away from God and on to other people, you fall out of love with God. When your attention is misdirected away from God and on to other people, you fall out of love with other people – or they fall out of love with you. When your attention is misdirected away from God and on to other people, you fall out of love with yourself.

If you want to love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as yourself, do not compare yourself to others. If you do, you won't fall in love, you will undermine your sense of self-worth, you will undermine your relationship with others, you will undermine your belief in God.

If you want to live an abundant life, a life that feels like it has worth and value, and that has something of an eternal significance then turn away from setting yourself above others, or from feeling inferior to others, and look to the teacher for guidance; follow the Good Shepherd through the dark valley; nourish yourself from the Bread of Life; drink from the Living Water; worship the Great High Priest; graft yourself to the True Vine; allow the Divine Potter to shape you; turn your hear to listen to the Word; be illuminated by the Light of the World.