

A Sermon for The Last Sunday of Trinity

Luke 18.9-14

A sermon preached by The Revd Edward Thornley

Last weekend, I went on a day conference at St Martin in the Fields called 'Places of Belonging.' It consisted of a selection of talks run by a professor named John Swinton, who has recently carried out a great deal of work in the field of disability studies and spirituality; most recently in pastoral care for people suffering from severe dementia. This is a field which I have been greatly involved with myself over the past few years, and is something I want to continue engaging with; and so I attended the study day in the hope of learning something new... and I did.

One of the speakers was a newly ordained priest named Rachel Wilson. Rachel has been a priest for a year now, and serves her title post in Dartford. Rachel has cerebral palsy, and was reflecting on her experience as someone with a very heavy disability, yet who has managed to lead an extremely fruitful life and have a vibrant ministry. One of the many things she said to sum up where she felt she was in her life and ministry, was that even though she had a profoundly painful and challenging condition, although the condition in itself was not a good thing; she could use it for a good purpose. And use it to help people understand how to believe in God means having faith which goes beyond who we are and where we are, but points us towards a place where suddenly everyone is equal, everyone is a friend, and labels, even bodily conditions no longer matter.

To say that I was blown away by Rachel's talk would be a staggering understatement. And I think Rachel very beautifully captures the essence of what Jesus means in the parable we have just heard. Two men enter the temple. A pharisee and a tax collector. The pharisee prays whilst keeping an eye on the nearby tax collector, who grovels at God, begging for forgiveness of his sins. The pharisee gives thanks to God that he is not like "those others." Meanwhile, the tax collector shakes and begs, desperate to receive pardon - "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Thus, Jesus tells the righteous before him, who regard others with contempt, "This man went down to his home justified, rather than the other. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The point Jesus makes through teaching us this parable is the importance of humility, the importance of humility in prayer, and of prayer itself. Submission to God, opening and lifting up our hearts that we might be freed from all that separates us from God and neighbour. But there's something more which is implied here. In order to live this life God clearly calls us to, we have to accept something radical, radically humbling, and radically terrifying. Something about humility that goes beyond.

Let's look at these two characters. The pharisee is a regular congregant; a law abiding, prayerful, responsible worshipper. The problem is that the pharisee has let this go to his head, where he has stopped purely worshipping God, thinks he's safe and sound, and uses God to justify himself. Then there's the tax collector. Here is someone who has come from a troubled place; a way of life that many might look down upon. And yet through and despite his condition and his context, he opens himself up completely to the grace of God. He stands far off, won't even look up to heaven. This is someone who has clearly realised that he needs to know God, yet is completely humble, and without a hint of presumption or entitlement, opens his heart, his mind and his will to the possibility of redemption.

What the tax collector has achieved here is to show humility, but he shows us also what humility leads us to. Where the pharisee, despite being a holy and devout man, is content to dwell in a closed, isolated, self-fulfilling form of faith; the tax collector worships and prays in a way that points beyond himself and invites all we who observe him to go beyond ourselves, and towards something more beautiful, more courageous, more divine.

I wonder if you can see something of Rachel in this. I wonder if we can see something of the church in this. I wonder if we can see something of ourselves.

Next to the word "humility," I think the word "beyond" is very important. It is a beautiful moment when, like the pharisee, we feel as though we belong somewhere. That we are loved by God,

justified by God, part of a worshipping community. Part of an “able bodied” society, where we feel included, welcomed and can happily participate. Part of a community that has it’s routines, rituals and pleasantries, where everyone knows what they’re doing and where they’re going. But Jesus reminds us that there is a danger in all of that. A danger of being part of one community, that you forget the members and needs of others. A danger of becoming so entrenched in one way of life, a ritual, even a religion, that you lose sight of the fact that others exist and may too have something to offer. A danger of becoming so self-focused within a community, that we may even have created a place where those who are “different” are not seen as welcome. And even if they are welcome there is no provision for a way of life or a condition that “differs” to everyone else’s. A danger of becoming part of a community to the point where that is all it is, and it loses the essence of what it came to do in the first place. And we become so entrenched in our own understanding of what life, of what faith should be like, that we project that onto everything we encounter, rather than opening ourselves up to God, and letting God take us beyond where we are to something even more.

It is a beautiful moment when we know that we are loved, especially by those close to us. But it is a particularly beautiful moment, when we suddenly realise that there is one who loves us more than we might ever imagine. I think that’s how the tax collector felt. Having been broken, stumbling, staggering and weeping for so long; finally, there comes that moment when you experience a revelation of God’s love and grace which takes your breath away and lifts your spirit so far beyond where you are, that you know it’s real. I think that’s how Rachel feels. I pray that’s how we might feel.

But so often, I think we become scared. Scared of moving beyond where we are. Afraid of losing what we’ve established for ourselves. Frightened to step outside into the unknown, the unfamiliar where we find it difficult to know who we are, or maybe who we think we are. But that’s God’s calling - to embrace, an embrace which, yes, does include those we love and those things which are important to us in our lifetime and in our personal circumstance. But God also calls us beyond that, to an embrace which goes beyond who we think we are, beyond who we would prefer to be, or who we would prefer to be with; beyond even the fabric of our physical bodies. As Rachel, as Jesus remind us today; God calls us to love and to be loved, not just with those who we think we love, but those we ought to love, in places where we maybe didn’t expect to find love, even when we are in deep and profound pain. For it is when we are faced with those who are different, that we realise the world doesn’t just revolve around us, and that we are part of a bigger picture - a picture where everyone has a place, everyone is equal, everyone is a friend, together in God.

Let us pray. Loving, living God, may we be open to a true, humble, radical faith, which will enable us to embrace where we are, but also to look forward to who and where we might become. To live in humility, and to go beyond. We give you thanks for who we are, for those who we love, and those who love and watch over us. And we pray that in this community, in this church, and in this Eucharist, we might find something of what it means to become, and to be loved, more than we will ever know. Amen.