

Bishop Ian's Sermon at the Diocesan Evensong

St Ninian's Cathedral, Perth, 28th October 2018

It is nearly 5 months since my election as your Bishop, and a week since the Consecration, and I would like to thank everyone for the very warm welcome I and Carrie my wife have received.

I would also like to give particular thanks, firstly to the Provost, Hunter Farquharson, and the Cathedral community, to Carol Aitchison and Eleanor McGourty in the Diocesan Office, to the Dean, Kenny Rathband, and to John Ferguson-Smith; to everyone involved in getting the new bishop's house ready for us (called 'Sunnybank' and it lives up to its name!) and in arranging and attending the Consecration service. Secondly, to Bishop Kevin Pearson for all that he has done during the vacancy to care for the Diocese. Lastly, to you, the clergy and people of this Diocese, for all that you do, for your commitment and service, and for being the people that you are.

The new bishop had just been consecrated, and the press were hoping for a nice quote. "What does it feel like to be a bishop in this diocese?" one reporter asked. "I feel like a midgie at a campsite," said the bishop. "I know what to do, but I don't know where to start."

Not knowing where to start, I turn to scripture, to the reading we just heard: the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. I love the parables, they are little works of art like paintings or poems or music, that reveal new meanings every time we come back to them. This parable seems simple to understand: the Pharisee is a deeply religious man of his people; the Tax Collector, who worked for the Romans, is a traitor to religion and country. So the meaning seems clear: humble Tax Collector good, proud Pharisee bad.

But as the theologian Paul Tillich once said about St Paul's image of the gospel as a stumbling block, the danger is stumbling over the wrong thing. Whenever a parable seems this simple, this obvious, we need to look again, because as a careful reader of Luke's Gospel will realize, Luke is the master of reversal. From Mary's Magnificat to Jesus' words to the thief on the cross, there is always a twist that turns the world upside down.

What this parable neglects to mention is that the Pharisee was singing 'Amazing Grace' on his way to pray. The Pharisees were a spiritual renewal movement in early Judaism that encouraged Jews not just to practise their faith in the Temple but also in daily life, to apply the Torah to everyday living, to live God's grace. We would still find their message relevant and challenging today. Luke tells us that the Pharisee sheds tears as he prays, he has a deeply-felt faith. He is a good man, ask him what he thinks of the Tax Collector and he will say, "There but for the grace of God go I."

The parable also neglects to say that the Tax Collector will not be resigning from his shady occupation. He has no intention of changing his life, making restitution or even saying sorry. Tomorrow again he will take money from others, hand some of it over to the government and put some aside for himself. But his one virtue is truth - he knows he deserves nothing, but knows that he is loved anyway.

The parable is not really about Pharisees and Tax Collectors. It is about humanity, as shown in an alternative version like this:

"Two people went up to the supermarket to shop, one fit and athletic, the other overweight and out of breath. As they queued at the check-out, the fit, athletic one thought, "Thank goodness I'm not like those lazy, unhealthy, smokers who eat bad food, or even like this fat person in front of me. I go to the gym three times a week; I carefully watch what I eat; and I only buy organic, low-fat food."

But the one who was overweight thought only, "Thank goodness I've enough to get through another week. The way I live, I just don't deserve it."

This one took truth home with them, the other carried only delusion. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The real meaning of the parable is that both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector are equally loved by God and equally worthy of that love. As Desmond Tutu says, "There is nothing I can do to make God love me more; there is nothing I can do to make God love me less." One of them knows this now, the other does not know it yet.

When we hear the parable as a morality tale about humility and arrogance, we just end up saying “God, we thank you that we are not like this Pharisee!” And when we become ‘pharisaic’ about the Pharisees, we may end up accusing not just Pharisees but Jews themselves, with horrific consequences not just in history but today. Yesterday’s anti-semitic murders in the synagogue in Pittsburgh have shocked the world. As the Bishop of Pittsburgh, Dorsey McConnell wrote yesterday: *“Someone chose to hate, and chose to kill. And now we are faced with a choice as well – to do nothing, or to reject this hatred in the strongest possible words and actions.”* I hope that you will join me now in doing just that, for all our Jewish sisters and brothers.

However, anti-semitism is not our only way of excluding people. We are seeing a rapid growth in the fear of people who are different from us not just in religion, but in appearance, culture, language, age, lifestyle and sexuality. This fear of difference is now being encouraged by some in our society for their own ends. It leads to hate speech against immigrants, sexual abuse against women and children, violence against gay people, neglect of disabled and mentally ill people. It leads people to think, or even say, “God, I thank you that I am not like them.”

As soon as we divide the human family into insiders and outsiders, those who deserve and those who don’t, we have aligned ourselves squarely with the Pharisee in the parable, even if we think it’s the Pharisee we are excluding. Whenever we draw a line between who’s ‘in’ and who’s ‘out,’ we will find God on the other side, because the Gospel is always about inclusion. As the poem by Edwin Markham says:

*He drew a circle that shut me out -
heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
we drew a circle and took him in.*

The Church is that wider circle drawn around the vast array of human beings with all their difference, all made in God’s image, the image of Love. That is our mission, in humility to be a Church that makes real that Love for everyone, and draws the circle that takes them in.

There is nothing else for which we will be judged, in the end, only Love. Love is the meaning of all religion, the heart of every relationship, the root of all justice, the condition of true peace, the quality of humanity, the name of God. Without Love, as St Paul says, we are nothing.

Roland Walls, priest and hermit, counsellor to many, left these words when he died in 2011, which renew me every time I hear them, and so I share them with you now:

“Keep therefore Love to be praised, shewn, and treasured – bring all things, all humankind, all circumstances into the light of that Love. So great is this calling that I leave you, that to fail in it is worth more than success in any other. May he who was transfigured by Love, transfigure us all as he brings us to Glory.