

**Pentecost 20**  
**27/10/2019**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Joel 2:23-32**  
**Psalm 65**  
**2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18**  
**Luke 18:9-14**

### **The Freeing Grace of God**

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

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*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.  
Amen.*

Today's readings centre around the temple in Jerusalem, the temple atop Mount Zion.

The psalmist proclaims:

“O God, in Zion ...

Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.” (Ps. 65.1, 4)

The prophetic voice of Joel calls out a divine promise:

In the last days, “in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem ... shall be those whom the Lord calls.” (Jl. 2.32)

Narrating the last days of the Apostle Paul, Second Timothy speaks of Paul:

“... already being poured out as a libation ...” — the image here is one of being poured as a sacrifice on God's altar.

And in the parable taught by Jesus:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector.”

And the tax-collector prays like a prodigal son — “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

And the Pharisee prays like an older brother — “God, I thank you that I am not like other people ...”

What strikes me about these four reflections centring on the temple is how each of them speak differently about the saving work of God.

The Psalmist speaks of the temple as the place where God forgives transgressions. And from this centre point in Zion the deliverance of God opens up and reaches out to the whole world.

“O God of our salvation;

you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.” (Ps. 65.5)

Psalm 65 gives us this sense of the reach of God's saving power from the temple to the world. Earth and water, sea and sky, mountains and valleys, the teeming life of God that covers the earth, that is tended by the Great Gardener of Eden: showered by rain, carved by the natural “wagon tracks” of God's intimate mercies through creation, overflowing joy, and abundant bounty, richness. All creation sings — from the mountains to the valleys — sings and shouts together for joy!

For the prophet Joel, the rain of creation is not simply for the grain. But becomes, in the prophetic utterance, the healing rain that reconciles and redeems in the aftermath of struggle. The lost become found. That which was consumed by hopper, destroyer, and cutter is washed away in readiness for renewal. And shame shall be no more. For the Lord our God will intervene and pour out — like a libation — an offering of the Spirit to the world: on young and old, free and slave, male and female, on flesh: the bodies sustained by the overwhelming grace of God in the food we eat, the lands we dwell in, the people who are gathered together in communities of love and trust.

Throughout today's readings from the Psalms and the Book of Twelve Prophets we hear the effusive praise for a God who bears with God's people. The unashamed thanksgiving to God who gathers a people in the temple, and from the temple expands the reach of saving glory to the whole world, to all people, for healing and renewal: as the Spirit is poured out, and the healing waters over which the Spirit brooded in the beginning, continue to cleanse and restore the world.

These themes of praise for God's faithfulness continue even as the end of the Apostle Paul is narrated. The same clear ring of praise can be heard, that God has granted favour to the Apostle to the Gentiles. Though Paul was deserted in his time of defence God was there, giving him strength. And so, "To [the God of our rescue] be the glory for ever and ever. Amen." (2 Tim 4.18)

Across these three readings — from the Psalms, from Joel, and from Second Timothy — we hear a note of praise: "Thanks be to God who has chosen to grant us favour, in the temple, in the world, by his Spirit, in the midst of times of defence and in the aftermath of struggle."

Praise the Lord! For the Lord has chosen to bless us with all good things!

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As if to provide a counter-voice to this effusive praise rising up to heaven with open hearts, Jesus says:

"... the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Lk. 18.13-14)

There is a certain sense in which our Gospel reading cuts across the grain of the other readings set for today. Unlike the calls to praise that we are invited into, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector cautions us about the misuse of praise.

The two figures:

a Pharisee — a religious leader, a diligent keeper of the law, a teacher, a good man, pious and true.

and,

a tax-collector — worshipping in the temple, and so a Jewish man, trying to be pious, and yet a tax-collector: collecting taxes for the Roman occupiers, whose presence placed the Jewish people under burden; perhaps perceived as a traitor to his own people, complicit in the ongoing occupation; perhaps dishonest, taking more than he was rightfully owed.

These two figures gather together in the temple. And pray. One a prayer of praise; the other a prayer of repentance, a call for mercy. Jesus says, it was the one who prays for mercy that is justified.

What has gone wrong with the Pharisee's praise?

At first glance the lesson seems to be one of humility. The Pharisee's praise goes awry because he fails to be humble, emphasising too much that he is the special recipient of God's grace, one of the chosen few. And for that reason is a Pharisee, and not like those thieves, and adulterers, or — thank God — a tax-collector.

Of course the lesson that we should be humble is the stated lesson of this parable, and so we should heed this lesson.

And yet, like all good parables, if we dig a little deeper, if we take a step back we might see something more.

This parable in Luke's Gospel sits within a broad movement of sayings, and parables, and teachings of Jesus. From stories about lost sheep and coins — and a lost son. Banquets and managers and widows seeking justice. Mercy sought by the tormented rich man, from the one who God saves. There are themes of hospitality, mercy, and generosity: in other words, grace, running throughout these stories and teachings. I want to suggest that these themes continue into the story of the Pharisee.

The Pharisee does not get wrong the importance of praise. We have heard from the tradition we share with the Pharisee today in a Psalm of praise, and a prophetic voice speaking of God's salvation. And both of those readings speak quite clearly about the ones God will and does choose in the temple, and in the end days.

But what about the hospitality of God? In the prayer that says, "oh, but not like the thief, or the rogue, or the adulterer, or the tax-collector — they are not welcomed in my prayer of praise."

But what about the generosity of God? In the prayer that says, "well, I do the right thing, so I must be good; and if that one over there betrays his people, or doesn't take responsibility, then nothing good can come of them."

But what about the project of the great and generous God we meet in Jesus? In the prayer that says, "forgive us our sins ... for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."

It is fitting that we should read this caution about praise in Luke's Gospel. Because Luke's Gospel constantly pushes us to think about the open arms of God for the world. The open arms that welcome home a lost son, and warns us not to be a resentful brother. The open arms of those with plenty to give to those with need. The open arms of simple faith that welcome the grace of God into the world in surprising ways.

The Gospel of Luke is not saying that we should not offer prayers of thanksgiving. But if we must praise, let our praise recall the grace at the bottom of the well of God's deep, deep love. Let our praise recall our freedom to be honest about our failure. Because our praise should be marked not by self-righteousness, but by the hospitable, merciful, and generous love of God.

What goes wrong with the praise of the Pharisee is that he does not see that the tax-collector too is found and held by the overwhelming grace of God. That psalms of praise that begin in the temple often open up to the whole world. That prophetic words

of divine promise that begin with restoring what is lost for the chosen, often open up to the bountiful outpouring of the Spirit.

The Pharisee needs to look further along in the Gospel of Luke. When the temple gives way to a house, and the house gives way to the Spirit, and the Spirit promised by Joel gives way to a new temple: the holy communion of saints, moving out into the world with the proclamation that God's hospitality, and generosity, and mercy: the grace of God has come into this world and embraced us all! From the waters that grow the plants, the beauty of the world we are given, the restoration we find in tender mercies, the grace of God blows through the world and holds us, finds us, loves us.

And so ... let us never look to those who stand a little way off and say they are not sought by God, that we are loved and they are not, that we have received mercy and they must still be uncertain.

Let us be freed by the knowledge of God's grace. And recall the deep praise of our ancestors. For in the embrace of God's grace we are free to confront our failing, because even that shall not erase the generous gift of God's love.

*Amen.*

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