

Pentecost 20
23/10/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Joel 2:23-27
Psalm 65
Luke 18:9-14

Of Righteousness and Contempt

In a sentence:

Humility overcomes hard righteousness to bring reconciliation for all

The obvious lesson from our Gospel reading this morning is, Don't be the Pharisee: "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." This presumes, of course, that we all want to be exalted, at least a little bit!

This reading works even for those not really sold on the whole God thing. We value humility and have little time for self-righteous posturing. Not taking ourselves too seriously is appreciated by others, and so is a helpful rule of engagement as we move through daily life. Here endeth the lesson, then – at least the obvious, moral lesson – and a good one to learn.

But let us look to see what might be less obvious here. While the two figures in Jesus' little story are poles apart in terms of moral judgement, they have in common that each stands at his pole *alone*. I don't know whether this is intentional in the original telling of the story, but I'm going to make quite a bit of it in what follows! The Pharisee is a self-made man. It is "standing by himself" that he declares his judgement on himself and the other. He needs no other, because this is the meaning of self-righteousness: righteousness by virtue of what I am or have done, perhaps against great odds, with reference only to the truth I perceive and not to others and their truths. The unexpected and usually unobserved effect of self-righteousness is that such a person ultimately stands alone in the world they have created, which does not require and so finally does not admit others. The heaven of the self-righteous has a population of just one. My presumption to be able to perceive the unrighteousness of all others excludes them. Judging and rejecting others has no end and, finally, I am alone.

The experience of the tax collector is the aloneness of being rejected. We don't know *why* he considers himself unworthy before God but we can take him at his word that he is, for whatever reason, morally (or otherwise) unworthy. If the Pharisee is a self-made man, this tax collector is a self-*un*made one. This is the moral reading of their different experiences.

But the important point is not the difference of their moral achievements but the similarity of the effect of those achievements: both men stand alone. Both have isolated themselves. This sameness makes possible a new perception of their difference. No longer is this difference in their moral performance; it is in their perception of their being alone. For the Pharisee, aloneness is a virtue to be celebrated, for which he even thanks God. Or, more precisely, the Pharisee doesn't see the aloneness but only his isolating righteousness. The Pharisee doesn't know his condition. And so he also mistakes the condition of the tax collector. The Pharisee sees the other's sin but not the other's aloneness. The Pharisee, then, doesn't see how he and the tax collector are *the same*.

While the Pharisee celebrates his righteousness and the alone-ing it brings, for the tax collector, aloneness is a devastating affliction he desperately wants to escape.

Recognising his problem, he seeks relief by the only means available – the appeal for mercy. And so the one whom the Pharisee’s moral, alienating righteousness holds in contempt now finds true, reconciling righteousness.

Hoping that this much has made sense, now for something less sensible. All this makes possible what is, on most grounds, an untenable assertion but one we must nonetheless make. If the tax collector is alienated by hard righteousness and is restored to life by God before the one who rejected him, then *the tax collector is Jesus himself*. It was the righteousness of the Pharisees, priests and scribes which cast Jesus out – which “alone-d him” – in crucifixion. Easter Saturday becomes the prayer for mercy – a strangely unvoiced prayer of the dead – and the resurrection becomes God’s healing insistence on life not only for himself but for those who rejected him in Jesus. The tax collector’s prayer is not for himself only.

Notice how far we are here from the mere morality of arrogance and humility as personal attributes we might or might not possess and which we eulogise or lament in others. Humility is now nothing like a meek mildness but the opposite of the hard righteousness which divides and alienates us from each other and even from ourselves. Humility becomes the possibility of connection, reconciliation, and so of the creation of something which wasn’t there before. The truly humble do not slip quietly into the background. The truly humble are the means by which the world is made whole again. The tax collector’s prayer is not for himself only.

This is, perhaps, an appealing exaltation of the humble. But there is some bad news here. Such justification as the tax collector received that day in the Temple didn’t change much. Things will be the same tomorrow as they are today. The Pharisee isn’t likely to have changed, nor most of the rest of us who are like him to varying degrees. Ours is a world of harsh alienating righteousness, increasingly pressing towards cynical contempt and contemptuous cynicism. This is not the rejection of righteousness but a relentless demand for it – a demand in and all around us.

In the face of this, prayer for reconciliation, and work toward it, are a struggle, something of which we see in the demeanour of the tax collector and in the crucifixion. There is nothing easy about a sinner’s prayer for mercy. Humility which is merely a mood or way of negotiating difficult circumstances cannot survive the “cost” of mercy. The humility which creates is difficult work. Without the conviction that things can be made out of nothing – the conviction that God will raise the dead – humility is something better seen in other people, a convenient pathology which makes our lives easier (if not theirs).

The humility of the tax collector, however – the humility of Jesus himself – recognises poverty and trusts that God can do something about it. Death and nothingness – the ultimate humiliations – are not barriers to life. And the humility which seeks mercy from God also seeks mercy in the world. To be humble in this way is not to be weak but to desire the smashing of the cold fetters of hard righteousness. This is not easy in a world like this one, in which the alienating righteousness of the Pharisee in Jesus’ story is part of what drives our society and its politics.

Cynicism and contempt are the fruit of an excluding righteousness, the application of some moral or political code against which the enemy measures up only very poorly. This contempt, however, is not a moral flaw in those who look about with contempt but a misreading of justice and righteousness, usually on all sides. Against this, Jesus summons us to what he calls elsewhere the righteousness which exceeds that of the Pharisee (Matthew 5.20). The righteousness of the Pharisee leads to a myriad of heavens with population one, from which we can hurl contemptuous abuse at others in their lonely heavens. But the righteousness of God is towards a single heaven bursting

at the seams with Pharisees and tax collectors, Russian presidents (and American ones), rapacious colonists and displaced indigenes, billionaire entrepreneurs and gullible consumers, cynical politicians, sarcastic shock jocks, smug baby boomers, sanctimonious gossips and even Uniting Church ministers. There they – we – all shall be, in a heaven pressed down and flowing over for the wantonness of unrighteous grace, of unrighteous mercy, of unrighteous forgiveness and of unrighteous reconciliation. With graced abandon, the unjust justice of God exceeds that weaponised righteousness with which we cut and divide so deeply.

Let us, then, not cheapen humility by mistaking it for niceness, and the call to humility as a nudge in the direction of not taking ourselves too seriously. Humility, at least that of Jesus the tax collector, testifies to God's refusal of any final alienation and so to the power of God to reconcile.

Blessed are the humble – blessed are the peace-makers. They will be called the children of God because, like God's first Son, their way of mercy and reconciliation grants a glimpse of what heaven looks like.

Humble yourselves, then, that God might exalt the whole world.
