

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 178

Sunday 23rd October 2022

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to Cutting Edge Camelot this Sunday.

Scripture Passages

Psalm 84: 1-7

How lovely is your dwelling place,

O LORD of hosts!

² My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

³ Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young, at your altars,
O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.

⁴ Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. *Selah*

⁵ Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

⁶ As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.

⁷ They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

Luke 18: 9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

¹³ But 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!’

¹⁴ 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.”

Reflection

Last week we were looking at the need to persist in prayer. This week’s parable also concerns itself with prayer but it has a somewhat different emphasis. And the Psalm set for today, the opening section of Psalm 84, provides further insights into the meaning of prayer.

Drawing these themes together we might see prayer in terms of a spiritual journey, one in which our relationship with God grows and develops.

But in any journey, we need first of all to know where it starts.

The parable which Jesus tells about the Pharisee and the tax collector gives an answer to this question which might surprise us.

For if we approached this parable without knowing how it ends we might be tempted to think that the Pharisee provides us with a starting point for our journey. After all, is not the Pharisee the religious professional and is he not

well versed in the ways of God? He addresses God with boldness and confidence and he is clearly used to praying.

And is his behaviour not impeccable? He goes beyond his strict religious duties by fasting regularly and giving in material terms more than is required.

And yet we do of course read this parable in the light of its conclusion. This clearly states that it is the tax collector and not the Pharisee who goes home justified before God.

So if we are to find a starting point for our journey in prayer we have to look elsewhere. And this starting point, again surprisingly, comes from the tax collector in the parable.

This is surprising because the reputation of tax collectors in those days was a proverbially wicked one. They were responsible for collecting taxes on behalf of the Roman authorities but tax collectors often went beyond what they were legally entitled to collect and added their own demands onto the bill. So John the Baptist advises tax collectors who come to him for baptism to collect no more than is due to them and when the tax collector Zacchaeus is converted he offers to repay fourfold any amount which he may have obtained through cheating other people.

Conscious of this, the tax collector is weighed down by a heavy sense of guilt and shame as he goes to the Temple to pray to God. He finds the holy surroundings of the Temple too much for him so he dares not get too close. Rather he stands far off. And his shame and awareness of his guilt is graphically illustrated by his inability to look upwards towards heaven. He feels totally cut off from God's grace.

So all that he can do is to beat his breast in a sign of extreme contrition and remorse and to utter the simple cry 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' This

is indeed an utterly straightforward and unvarnished cry and yet it is all that he needs to say. He has reached a place of inner honesty where he is willing to confess his sin before God and not to offer any excuses.

This is a difficult point for any one of us to reach and normally it does not come entirely voluntarily. Very often we only make such an open admission of guilt when we have come to a point where there is no alternative.

And yet we can utter such a simple cry of need and desperation in other circumstances. Perhaps it may come when we sense ourselves to be totally out of our depth in the challenges which life throws at us. Such occasions may also remind us that, in easier times, we may have felt that we had no need of God and can cope with life on our own. If so then our cries are likely to include an awareness that we have been mistaken in our self-sufficiency and that we need to turn from it.

So the starting point in prayer which the tax collector offers is one of pure need before God and of an honest acknowledgement and awareness of our own sin and guilt.

And yet this is a starting point and we need to ask ourselves what happened next. We are told that the tax collector went home 'justified' and with his prayer heard by God. But what did he do then? Did he just return to exactly the same lifestyle? If so whenever he next came back to the Temple he would do so with exactly the same prayer and so the same cycle would begin again leading nowhere. Surely there must be more of a sense of progression in our journey of prayer than that. Surely as we continue to pray so our relationship with God and other people begins to change and develop.

But again in terms of the development of our prayer life the Pharisee provides us with a warning rather than an example. We should not follow

the Pharisee's model of prayer even though he is the religious professional and seemingly mature in his faith.

For although the Pharisee addresses God there is no sense of his having a spiritual hunger or his desiring God for His own sake. Indeed there is no great interest in God's plans and purposes. Rather the opening address to God is used as a means to tackle the real subjects of the Pharisee's prayer. Those concerns are himself and how he compares with other people.

The Pharisee stands by himself, safely insulated from those around him. He lacks any genuine sense of social connection. He believes that he is completely different from a whole range of wicked people whom he names before God. And he concludes this list with the tax collector who has also come to the Temple to pray.

He does not pray for these people nor is he interested in either their spiritual or material wellbeing. Rather what interests him is the flattering light that this comparison places him in before God. He is proud that he is unlike them.

Having looked at other people the Pharisee goes on to look at himself. And his portrait is once more a flattering and self-congratulatory one. His life is full of religious achievements. He fasts twice a week and dutifully tithes his income.

But for all this God's verdict on the Pharisee's life of prayer is stark and uncompromising. It is the tax collector rather than the Pharisee who is justified (in the right) before God. The expectations set up at the beginning of the parable are overturned.

So we must look elsewhere if we are to find a model of how our prayer life can grow and develop. It does indeed start with the model of the tax

collector, an acknowledgement of sin and a cry for God's mercy. But what happens to us when we receive God's mercy and forgiveness?

In response to this question, we turn to our extract from Psalm 84. This is a psalm which describes the pilgrimage made by the people of the Old Testament on their way to celebrate a festival in the Temple at Jerusalem.

A pilgrimage, whether literal or metaphorical, is an apt way of describing positively how our prayer life can develop. For on a pilgrimage we grow and learn. We are never static do we ever believe that we have reached the point of arrival and have nothing more to learn. This contrasts with the Pharisee who is so sure of his position before God and is fixed and rigid in his perceptions both of God and of other people.

And rather than being concerned with themselves or other people, these pilgrims were motivated by spiritual desire, that of seeing God face to face. This for them was focussed around the holy place of the Temple. It was this hope and expectation which spurred them onwards in their journey.

And so the Psalm begins with an expression of love for God and the desire to be where God is. The longing for 'the courts of the Lord' is so strong and intense that it causes both the soul to faint and the heart to sing for joy in praise of God.

The Temple is a place where the weak and vulnerable can find shelter. So small birds like the sparrow and the swallow find a resting place in the Temple where they can bring up their young. The personal nature of the pilgrims' desire for God is expressed in the use of the personal pronoun 'My' to God.

In God we find both joy and security. God's house is our final home, a place of unrestrained praise and happiness.

After this opening salvo of praise the pilgrimage theme of the psalm emerges more explicitly when it is declared that 'Happy are those...in whose heart are the highways to Zion.'

This focusses our attention away from the physical, external journey that the pilgrims are making towards the internal journey and process of growth that is taking place in their hearts. They know the way to their destination lies not through an external map but through a sense of purpose that is internalised deep within their hearts.

However, the external points of their journey are not forgotten as the 'valley of Baca' is then mentioned. The valley of Baca in ancient times was seen as a dry and hostile place, a hostile environment for the pilgrims to journey through. However, this unpromising terrain is transformed by the presence of pilgrims into a place of streams and pools. This reminds us of the spiritual impact that we can have on our surroundings as we continue in our own pilgrimage. As we find our strength and joy in God so these dry and withered places can be transformed into fruitful places of refreshment.

So if we look at the development of our prayer life in terms of a journey our first question must be whether or not we have ever reached the starting point. Can we share the tax collector's cry of pure need and confession before God?

But if we have reached that starting point do we keep coming back to it again and again as we find ourselves unable to progress any further in our life of prayer and our relationship with God? It may be that though we ask for God's mercy and forgiveness we are unable to believe that in Christ this has truly been given to us.

And if we are on a developing journey with God we may ask ourselves how spiritual desire and the expectation and anticipation of meeting with God prompts us to move forward.

And also what spiritual impact do we have on other people as we journey through terrain that can at times be tough, dry and uncompromising? Do we help such places to be transformed so that they become fruitful? Or are we overwhelmed and swallowed up by the difficulties that surround us?

The answers to these questions may well provide a measure of how much our lives have truly been transformed by our developing relationship with God as expressed through prayer.

Tristram

Points for Prayers

- Our own journey in prayer and praise
- Choice of a new Prime Minister
- Our response to the cost of living and wider economic crisis
- Climate emergency
- Conflict between Russia and the Ukraine
- Those whom we know who are facing illnesses of all kinds and have recently been bereaved
- For the Deanery in considering Pastoral Reorganisation
- For Elliscombe House in Higher Holton and its residents
- For teachers, children and parents of North Cadbury church school and other local schools currently on half term
- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

Hymn

A well known hymn which expresses and celebrates the need for God's grace is 'Amazing grace.'

Services for this week and next

Sunday 23 rd October	8.00 am Communion, Blackford
Sunday 23 rd October	9.30 am Communion, South Cadbury
Sunday 23 rd October	9.30 am Matins, Compton Pauncefoot
Sunday 23 rd October	9.30 am Morning Worship, North Cheriton
Sunday 23 rd October	11.00 am Communion, North Cadbury
Sunday 23 rd October	11.00 am Communion, Holton
Sunday 23 rd October	11.00 am Sunday Worship, Yarlinton
Sunday 23 rd October	6.30 pm Evening Service, Galhampton
Sunday 30 th October	8.00 am Communion, Blackford
Sunday 30 th October	9.30 am Family Service, North Cheriton
Sunday 30 th October	11.00 am Matins, Maperton
Sunday 30 th October	11.00 am Harvest Service, Bratton Seymour
Sunday 30 th October	4.00 pm Evensong, Galhampton

Excalibur

Excalibur is back in paper form. It contains details of Camelot people, a record of baptisms, weddings and funerals undertaken through the church in the Camelot Parishes. The October edition of Excalibur has now been published online at camelotparishes.co.uk.

The Parish Office

If Rob is not in the Office during normal office hours please contact him via email (office@camelotparishes.org.uk) or on 01749 850934.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

*We pray that 'we might live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

(Ephesians 5: 2)