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Hymns:     82     “O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder”  
          154     “Come, divine Interpreter”  
          520     “Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart”  
          498     “God of all power, and truth, and grace”

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Readings:  2 Timothy 4:6-8 & 16-18  
              Luke 18:9-14

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### **“HOLY JOES!”**

All preachers, me included, salivate when a passage of scripture like this morning’s is thrown up by the Lectionary. Unlike other more complicated narratives, this one turns itself into a sermon without too much trouble. It’s like buying a suit “off the peg” in Marks and Spencer rather than made-to-measure in Saville Row.

The Pharisee in the story, all puffed up with himself, is well-known to all of us – full of his own worthiness, happy for everyone to know how generous he is, peacocking himself around the town where he lives. He’s smug, boastful, a snob who looks down the length of his aquiline nose at lesser mortals. Well, if you haven’t met such people, I certainly have. And I’ve been peddling stories about them all the years I’ve been occupying this pulpit. It was the religion I grew up with in my home town. It seemed to breed such people. Anything that made people laugh made these people frown. For them, fun was sin. They wore their pinched faces, their severe looks, and their Sunday best when they wanted to emphasise their holiness. They almost drove me from religion altogether. And it was their judgementalism that really got under my skin. They were self-styled saints. People like me were definitely not. They were saved. We, at least in their eyes, were lost.

I must say in passing that my readiness (eagerness) to be so judgemental about their judgementalism clearly shows that there’s a bit of the Pharisee in me too! So I had better be careful.

That’s one of the two characters on display in this story. And then there’s the tax collector. I suppose it’s still true that we don’t exactly like tax gatherers but our dislike is as nothing compared to the loathing they would have experienced at the hands of the people of Jesus’s day. They had special reasons for disliking the tax man. They were raking in the money not for the legitimate public works or welfare support of their own government but they were doing so for the wicked, imperial, usurping, oppressive Romans who were occupying their country. So it was doubly hard in those days to like the tax collector. It was easy to side-line or to stereotype them. And yet, as is shown here, they were human too. Perhaps they even hated themselves just a little bit (they might have said something like “I wish I didn’t have to do this job but I’ve gotta get money to support my wife and kids somehow....”). Hey ho! They were easy fodder for the vaunting Pharisee, gobbled up by his smarmy self-centredness.

So it's an easy sermon to preach. Indeed it preaches itself. What I've written thus far didn't take much effort. But I can't leave matters there. I really can't. To boil this story down to the level of the two individuals mentioned in it would be a sad and impoverishing treatment of a story that's meant to hit us squarely between the eyes.

Religion has been driven from the public square over the last 300 years. The rise of science, the fruits of the Enlightenment, the increasingly threatening tides of secularisation and materialism have eroded the superstructure and, increasingly, the infrastructure of organised religion. To say nothing of the effects of war, famine, natural disaster. The truth claims and the status of religion are under threat in an alarming way. This is not new, of course. Matthew Arnold, writing 150 years ago, put it very succinctly in his musings on Dover Beach. He'd been watching the tide going out across the shingled shore under those famous white cliffs. And this is how he records his sensations:

*The sea of faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.*

Religion, the sea of faith, like a tide receding.

But religion, of course, lives on. It cannot simply be taken out of human life in the way some manufacturers take alcohol out of beer. There's no such thing as a decaffeinated version of faith. Just the full, stimulating stuff. But without any doubt, religion has had to morph in the face of the full-on social forces seeking to destroy it. And it has done so in three principal directions.

- It has retreated into holy huddles, drawn its wagons into a laager, created feel-good religion. It offers itself as a performance-enhancing drug to be taken intravenously to produce hyper-ventilating religion that's in denial of the wicked world. It's like singing in the dark to keep your spirits up.
- Or, in a search for survival, it has become brasher and harsher. It takes a more confrontational line to show its daring. Its doctrines become more hard-line. It's as if a weak point has been noticed and the need to shout louder thought to be a way of compensating for that fact. It's like King Canute daring the tide to come in. It becomes absolutist, if offers black and white options, it is unaccommodatingly suspicious of compromise. It is full-blown fundamentalism.
- Or, the most frequent option, simply deals with the problems raised by faith in the public sphere by never taking it or displaying it in the public sphere. Faith has been privatised. It's become individualised. It's become a matter of mere personal piety. It leads to its adherents fearing to stick their heads above the parapet. No-one seems to want to talk about faith anymore.

It's this last option which has been encouraged most by the thinkers and drivers of the intellectual agenda of the modern era. And that's why we must take some care and pay a great deal of attention to a story like the one we're considering this morning. We must not allow our modern mind-set to rob it of some of its important characteristics. It cannot be reduced to a simple morality tale about individual goodness or sin.

We must try to keep this story (and similar stories) free of all those forces, internal as well as external, that would reduce them to the realm of personal ethical and moral behaviour. For it contains so much more. For one thing, it displays an interplay between the haves and the have-nots of this world that challenges, that challenges radically, the way our societies and nations and even the international order is organised. There is macro-morality at play here. This story throws light on the way our world is organised.

And the corporate, social, collective, systemic way of looking at the story is vital if our faith is to remain relevant in our contemporary world.

A few years ago Jennifer Potter and I wrote a book. It was called "World Without End?" and it examined the way, again and again, the International Community behaves when faced with one crisis or another. The plight of the country in crisis draws the attention of the media, the politicians, and the powerful arms of the world of agencies and NGO's. We looked at the way the people of East Timor, Eritrea, Iraq, Bosnia and Rwanda were reeling under one form of oppression or another. They were on the ropes. And then the Big Boys from the International Community drove into town.

"Poor devils!" they said. Thank God we're not like them – corrupt, weak, rogues. No doubt that's why they are where they are. They've got themselves into this mess. But we can do something for them. We have our development/aid budgets we can draw on. We can show them our generosity in responding to humanitarian need. We're organised to help. It's great that we can extend the hand of friendship to these people.

"These people", meanwhile, were consumed in misery. They'd endured genocide, slaughter, enslavement, robbery and destruction. So much so that they could hardly look up to heaven. They were reduced to beating their breasts and saying "God be merciful to us in our time of need."

And there you see the exact dynamic laid down in this parable of Jesus reproduced in one contemporary event after another where the modern-day Pharisee meets the ever-present tax collector. Condescension and patronage on the one hand, misery, despair, and trust in God on the other.

Indeed, it's the readiness of these poor and fragile nations to trust God in their hour of need which sends out its own message to the phariseism of the International Community who, as often as not, tend to weigh up their own interests before they lift a finger to help anyone, to farm out budgets to their own personal friends and allies, to calculate the risks to themselves as they preen themselves and strut their stuff in the midst of other people's despair.

Our scriptures today have been read by two senior members of the Diplomatic Corps – the Ambassador for the Republic of Fiji and the acting Ambassador for the Republic of Haiti. Both countries have been struck in recent times by major natural disasters – hurricane Winston in February and tropical storm Zena in April for Fiji and hurricane Matthew in more recent days for Haiti. Haiti has also recently suffered that dreadful earthquake and the incidents of UN imported cholera with a consequential loss of hundreds of thousands of lives.

When disaster struck, the International Community gathered like vultures around a decaying corpse. They promised billions of dollars. I wonder how much they actually coughed up in the end? Certainly nothing like the money they pledged in public. Of the money actually handed over, I wonder how much was given to NGO's and other agencies who then went and spent it as best they could. There were over 1000 NGO's working in Haiti in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. It's often known in popular parlance as "The Republic of NGO's". Certainly, a very very tiny percentage of the money given got into the hands of the Haitian State. Yet when things seemed to go wrong it was always the Haitian government that was accused of corruption.

The Pharisees are still at work. Telling people how good they are. Making a display of their generosity. And the tax collectors are certainly still in the frame. They don't look up to heaven. They beat their breasts. They recognise their powerlessness. And they cry out to God for help.

I tell you this – the wretched of the earth will in the end be justified rather than the mighty ones – they shall be put down from their seats. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled. And all who humble themselves will be exalted.

And that's not only true for individuals like you and me. It's equally true for nations too – mine as well as yours. May God help us in these troubled times.

Amen.