

St Thomas' and St Thomas' of the Air Church
August 11, 2024
Trinity XI
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There was a man,
A truly wicked and deceitful man. Rebellious and lost.
Who came upon the idea that he could rob some money from some
church people.

He selected an evangelical church in the next town

And attended a service.

He waited for the point in the service when the pastor

Invited people to the stage

Who had been saved by Jesus.

The man walked meekly forward

And "testified".

He told them that he was new to their city

But had been attending church each Sunday since his
childhood.

That he saw Jesus and had declared Him as his Lord and
saviour.

There was applause and shouts of hallelujahs all around.

They greeted him at the coffee hour, welcomed him to their
congregation and urged him to return.

When the man got home he told his wife that he had scored at the
new church and conned them into accepting him into their church

And that he planed to return and scam

the stupid suckers of the church for loads of money.

Now the man's wife happened to be a God fearing woman

she was furious and scolded him something awful

Demanding that he return the following Sunday

and tell the people the truth about himself

or suffer the consequences at home.

The obeyed his wife and the next Sunday he went back to the Church

They welcomed him with open arms and shook his hand.
When it was time to testify
He again walked to the stage
But this time he told the truth.
That he had lied to them last week in order to cheat and steal from them.

He said he had never been to church before

And had never seen Jesus
And had never accepted Jesus as his Lord and Saviour.
He told them he was an embezzler, an adulterer and alcoholic.
There was a stunned silence.

But then, the people rose up

Shouting and shaking their fists at him.
Liar! Thief! Blasphemer!
The ushers took him by the arms and shoulders
And threw him out the church doors into the street.

When the man got home he told his wife everything that had happened.

And he said,

You know those Christians are odd people
When I told them lies, they welcomed me in
And when I told them the truth,
They threw me out.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a story of two men in a similar situation

One who tried to talk his way into heaven
But didn't make it
And one who tried to talk himself out of heaven
But did make it.

The Gospel is a story that Jesus directs to people who think themselves better than others.

People who think the good life they lead will earn their way into heaven.

So if you have ever looked at people who do not go to church

And thought you were better than they are because you go to church every Sunday

Jesus is talking to you today.

If you have ever looked at people who are homeless

And thought you were better than they are because you have the same roof over your head each night.

Jesus is talking to you today

If you have ever seen people in prison and thought you were better than they are because you have not been incarcerated

Jesus is talking to you today.

If you ever looked down your nose at anyone for any reason and thought you were better than they were

Jesus is talking to you today.

I fear that if we are honest

Every one of us

Must confess that at some point in our lives

We have fallen into the

'I'm better than you'

Way of thinking.

Jesus is talking to us today in the Parable of the "Pharisee and the Publican":

Two men who could not be more different from each other.

The first is a Pharisee
that sect of the Jews
who exaggerated the letter of the law
and believed that strict and absolute compliance would
literally buy favor with God.

We think of them as those who came to worship the law more than
they worshiped God.

But they were the highest of Jewish society
and were revered for their piety and wisdom.
People bowed to them as they walked in the street.
As if they were royalty

The second man is a publican.

He was also a Jew,
but worked for the Romans
to collect taxes from the Jews
and paid them over to the Roman authorities.

It was common for publicans to collect more from the Jews
than was owed to the Romans
and pocket the difference.

If the tax was not or could not be paid,
the Publican could confiscate property for himself.

Publicans could also take the wives and daughters of delinquent
tax payers

for their own nefarious purposes.

They could also turn the taxpayer
over to the brutal Roman soldiers.

Threats and extortion were the rule of the day.

As you might imagine,
publicans were violently hated
and ridiculed (not without good reason)
because they were seen as both
traitors
and thieves and rapists.

So what is this loathsome sinner doing in the Temple?

Jesus puts the two men in motion and we see more contrast.

The Pharisee is in the heart of the temple.

We can imagine that there were a number of men praying in the temple (remember the women were excluded).

In the fashion of the time, he stood up to pray and we could expect that he raised his hands

and looked up to heaven as he spoke his prayer.

The publican would not come near the other men, but stood far off.

Separated by class

Status

Or ridicule

He would not lift his eyes up to heaven

and with his hands beat his chest.

Jesus gives voice to the two men and we begin to see further contrast;

We hear the Pharisee's prayer in which he:

Lists vices from which he abstains or which he attributes to the Publican:

Extortion

Unjustice

Adultery

Or sins committed by people like this publican here.

Then he lists some pious practices in which he engages:

I fast twice a week (well beyond what was expected)

I tithe upon all I possess (not just on the designated income)

We have no reason to believe the Pharisee's statement is not accurate.

His fasting and piety;

his compliance with God's laws

are not something to be ignored and not to be disdained.

And it is important to note that the Pharisee is not hypocritical. In the parable he is all that he boasts that he is.

But he is on the wrong track,
 his prayer is only about himself.
 He all but congratulates God
 on the excellence of His servant.

He glances at God but contemplates himself and that God is in his debt.

 He perceives a bargain in which
 he has done more
 Than the bargain required
 And that God is in his debt.
 The spirit of his prayer is all-wrong.
 He is smug
 Self-satisfied
 And believes he is in no need of grace.

He doesn't need God,
 Because his confidence is clearly in himself.

His prayer asks for nothing other than for God to be impressed with his vast accomplishments. For which he takes all the credit.

In Prayer as in everything else we do,
 it matters what we do
 but the spirit in which we do it is of equal concern.
 In Christianity the ends never justify the means.

Let's turn to the publican's prayer:
 "God be merciful to me, a sinner".

He makes no excuses,
 Cites no mitigating circumstances,
 Offers no explanation.

He takes full responsibility for his acts
and his sin
and he seeks God's mercy.

For the publican to ask for forgiveness
and restoration of his relationship with God
is a bold
and faith filled
act-- for a man so despised by his society.

He needs no help in pointing out his sins
Harbors no illusions
Makes no claim on God's favor.

He comes empty handed;
Nothing to brag about
Nothing to offer but his sins.

He is humble and repentant ,
but his faith has made him bold
to ask for something
that he has no right to expect—forgiveness and restoration
with God.

Jesus now pronounces judgment and the message of the parable;
speaking of the publican, He declares:

“I tell you this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.”

“Justified” in the King James Bible means: to be as if innocent in the eyes of God.

By his faith, the publican leaves the temple cleansed of his sins, as
If they never occurred the blood of Christ has blotted them out.

The Pharisee left the Temple as he had come in.
The Publican left a new man.

Will we?