

The Pharisees (the “Separated Ones”) were lay-people who tried to live in their ordinary lives according to the rigorous demands of the purity laws of the Temple. It was a little bit like living according to the Rule of St Benedict while carrying on a normal working life. Not at all easy but thoroughly admirable.

To Jesus' audience the Pharisee in the Gospel-parable was a model of virtue, a paradigm of piety. The sort of person they would long to be if only they were not so weak and distracted by the cares of the day. The hope for every Jewish mother was that her child would be like this righteous man. The Pharisee gives away ten per cent of everything he owns. Imagine if you gave ten per cent of your income to charity - what would you have to do without? The Pharisee fasts much more than he has to. In fact, Jews were obliged to fast only on one day a year, on the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*. This man fasts twice every week, and as in the rules for keeping *Ramadan*, this means no liquid as well as no food between dawn and dusk. Imagine doing that throughout Lent. He does it all year round. This Pharisee is amazing. If he isn't virtuous then no one is virtuous.

Do not picture him as a rotund, chubby cheeked picture of prosperity. He is more likely to be thin, with pinched features. It is the tax-collector who will be the well-fed, portly figure with the problem cholesterol. And there is no need to imagine a secret sub-plot in which the Pharisee is a hypocrite who is cruel and vindictive at home so that his wife and children live in fear of him while the tax-collector had a dysfunctional childhood and is the victim of unhappy circumstance. No, we are to take the parable at its face value. The Pharisee's mortification and sacrifice are real enough and, no doubt, sincerely meant. The tax-collector is a rogue, an extortioner and in league with the enemy, the Roman occupying power. So what is going on in this story?

The Pharisee for all his virtuous practices has never been introduced to God. He and God are strangers to each other. His prayer is not addressed to God but seems to be addressed to those from whom he stands apart rather than to God. He is saying, 'Look at me, what a model of piety I am'. In so far as he addresses God he is saying, 'How lucky, thou art, to have someone like me come to worship thee'. He is without love. His heart is hardened towards the tax-collector whom he slanders - the tax-collector was a rogue and a quisling but there is no rational conclusion from this that he is also an adulterer. The Pharisee despises this man who is nevertheless, in Jesus' eyes, a brother, a fellow-Jew, a child of God.

There was nothing likeable in the tax-collector's occupation nor in the way it was carried out. These tax men were unscrupulous swindlers, cheats and bullies. But this tax-collector knew what he was like and, for a moment at least, was sorry for it. He comes to God not to offer excuses or justifications, but simply to say 'sorry' and he does so with what has become one of the best-loved, most used prayers of all - 'Lord,

be merciful to me, a sinner'. He also stands apart, for he knows he is unclean and should not be in righteous company. His eyes are cast down; he beats his breast. Men in the Near East do not beat their breasts except in extreme emotion. It is an action of women. This man knows where he stands before God. He knows all he can do is throw himself on the mercy of God. That is why his prayer is heard. That is why he returns home justified in the eyes of God.

Once again Jesus turns the accepted world-view upside down. Once again he uses extremes to make his point. Once again Jesus angers his listeners and fans the flames of hatred that will soon consume him.

We who come to church on Sunday are not infrequently accused of being like the Pharisee. Hypocrisy is an easy jibe to make against us. "You pretend to be good and holy as you go through the motions of worship but you are no better than the rest of human kind". Such comment conveniently ignores the prayers we actually do say at Mass. We begin with an act of sorrow for our sins and the Mass is punctuated with appeals for God's mercy and forgiveness. "Lord wash away my iniquity and cleanse me from my sins.....Lamb of God...have mercy on us.....Lord I am not worthy." Were we to come to church to congratulate God on being lucky enough to have us worship him then the accusation strikes home. It is a danger and we do well to recognise and thereby avoid it. But actually, I have never met anyone with that attitude. We come, all too aware of our weakness, our frailty, our sins, knowing our need for God's help; knowing that our prayer must always be, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner."