



GOSPEL GOSSIP

**'Whoever exalts themselves will be humbled,
and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.'**

St Luke 18. 9-14

Sunday 26 October

The gospel reading is another picture story which Jesus paints in order to make a point. He tells of two men going to the Temple to pray, and the manner in which they did so. One was a Pharisee (a frequent subject of Jesus' criticism, and the other a tax-collector, a person Jesus was frequently criticised for mixing with. The Pharisees were a self-righteous bunch, who considered themselves superior to everybody else because they kept the Law (they considered) to the letter.

Now who likes tax-collectors? The HMRC today have a comparatively easy time from people unlike their counterparts 2000 years ago. Never mind the fact that tax-collectors separated people from their money, they were often corrupt and fraudulent, and made themselves rich, literally at the expense of others. Above all, they were hated because they had sold out to the Roman occupiers: the tax they collected went to Rome. As a result, they were no-one's friends – except Jesus'.

- Do you 'look down' on others – honestly?
- Who are society's 'inferiors' today?
- Why might you consider yourself superior?
- Would you not bother with a certain sort of person?
- How would you feel were you snubbed?

Jesus' was more than just pointing up the differences between two sorts of Temple worshippers. He went on to describe how each man prayed; their attitude. One, the Pharisee, was full of himself and clearly complacent in his faith. He did everything the Law commanded, as he was careful to remind God. It is obvious that he considered himself a paragon of virtue, and that God could not but be pleased with him. However, the tax collector wouldn't even raise his eyes to heaven. Instead he acted with penitence, beating his breast, and asking God to be merciful to him, a sinner.

Then comes the salutary sting. In case the Pharisees listening started preening themselves and wondering, proudly, if it were one of them about Jesus was talking as an example of faith, Jesus makes the telling point that would have taken the wind out of any of their sails. He tells his listeners that the one who went home and could be satisfied with his prayer and actions was not the Pharisee but the tax-collector. Yet Jesus wasn't just having a 'pop' at the Pharisees, he was emphasising the necessity of humility in prayer and in life. The Pharisee's faith was that of a tick-box variety. He did no more and no less than the letter of the law demanded. His motive was selfish; his actions mechanical. We don't know how 'faithful' (or observant of the Law) the tax-collector was, but we do know he was moved by sorrow over his treatment of others and his love for God, to acknowledge his failings.

- Is it easier to follow the letter or the spirit of the Law?
- Are you tempted in the practising of your faith to measure yourself positively against others?
- How prepared are you to acknowledge – truly – your shortcomings?
- What do you do to show you're penitent?
- Do you need to change your outlook?

Jesus' stories are not to criticise or to burst human egos and self-opinion, but rather to demonstrate how the individual can grow closer to God, who loves a humble and contrite heart, in the words of the psalm. Our pride, our self-justification, our good opinion of ourselves can be barriers between us and the love of God. If we sometimes don't experience that love, maybe we should ask what we're doing to block it, rather than blaming God for not loving?