

## Sunday 23 October 2022 – Joy

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### **Family**

We all belong to families, and I suspect many of us found the enforced separation from our families one of the most difficult things to bear.

Today we are here in church to celebrate a new member who has been added to a human family: baby Aiden (now so much more than a baby) and also the symbolic welcoming of him into the Christian family here in St James the Less.

In the parable or story we heard this morning which Jesus told to his disciples, we see two men coming to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray. It was sometimes felt that to pray somewhere like the Temple, with its long history for the Jewish Nation, was more efficacious than praying in a local synagogue. But the story makes no reference to this. Sometimes people feel that to pray in a church rather than at home is also more beneficial, and there is a point to this: that, as we share with our fellow Christians in corporate worship, we can share both their joys and sorrows. We become the real family of God here on earth.

From when I was a very small child, a reference to CHURCH meant people – the group of friends, adults and children – I shared time with every Sunday and often during the week. I seemed to have numerous aunties and uncles. This was possibly because we did not have a building which could be called a church; that space was occupied by a huge bomb site and our worship took place in what remained of the Sunday school rooms. The beginners' class which I joined at the age of three was in the old organ loft – all that remained of the original building. We had a wonderful time, singing choruses like *Only a boy called David*, and then jumping off our small chairs and rolling on the floor. This is what church really is: not the building, however old or beautiful, but Christians joining together to share their faith that God loves us all, and sent his Son into the world to show us how we should live our lives, and who was put to death for doing this.

Unlike most families, or even societies, we do not have to have certain qualifications to join. All are welcome to become part of the family from any race or background. Today, I know that through the wonders of modern technology we will have members of Aiden's family joining us in this celebration from the other side of the world.

Returning to our story which Jesus told to the disciples, it is often regarded as a story about what good prayer is, and what is bad or unacceptable prayer. Of course prayer is important in our lives; it is how we can communicate with our heavenly father. I wonder today how most people would cope without their phones, particularly the mobile ones. We feel the need to be constantly in touch with friends and family. As Christians we should also feel this need to be in touch with God, not just to tell him our problems, but to listen for his answers – some which we may not want to hear.

But in our story, there are not only two types of prayer but two individuals, both part of the Jewish family of God and both appealing to their covenant God to listen to them. First there is the Pharisee: a Jewish religious leader, he is usually seen as the bad guy, full of himself, and not really wanting to engage with God at all, but just there to be seen by others. And then there is the Tax collector, hiding behind a pillar and not wanting to be seen by the rest of the congregation, but praying desperately for what he has been doing with his life. He is seen as the good guy, because he is asking for forgiveness, but actually the word repentance doesn't enter into the equation.

I have just been reading a book by a Jewish theologian who has been taking a new look at the parables to see how a Jewish audience might interpret them differently. And what she says about the Pharisee and the Tax collector made me think in a different way. She suggests that the Pharisee's prayer could be interpreted as one of thanksgiving, as in her translation it starts with the words: *O God, I give thanks to you that I am not like the rest of the people.* Do we take time to thank God for the many opportunities we have been given in our lives, to be guided and sustained by our Christian faith and the church family to which we belong?

This man was a practicing Jew who had been given the opportunity to put his faith into action in a very public way, which he was trying to do. The Tax Collector was also successful by human standards and probably a very rich man, the equivalent of a millionaire today. He would have attended banquets hosted by the Roman occupiers of his country; as he collected money for them maybe that's why he is hiding away, as he has made himself wealthy by gathering extra taxes from the poor to fund such a lavish life style. He prays to God to forgive him, but he does not offer recompense for what he has done. He, unlike the Pharisee, has not abided by the codes of law given to his nation through the prophets.

And going back to the author I have been summarising, she finishes the parable with this translation of the Greek which she says is very ambiguous at this point: *To you I say, descending to his house, this one is justified alongside that one* – thus leaving out the latter half of the verse which she says is a repeat of a verse found elsewhere and does not belong here.

And why have I suggested this view of the parable? Because I feel we have much to learn from it, I continue with Amy-Jill Levine's words:

*At the end of the parable, we are left without a full resolution, which is what a good parable should do. Is the Pharisee praising God or praising himself? Is the tax collector trusting in the divine or not? Will he keep his day job and continue to sin or will he make restitution for his sins and find another line of work? We cannot fully identify either with the Pharisee, who will continue to behave in a righteous manner far beyond what most people will do, or the currently repentant tax collector who may continue to do the wrong thing. But we do see again through the parable ideas that we already, somehow, knew but did not want to acknowledge. We see that divine grace cannot be limited, for to limit this grace would be to limit the divine. The type of generosity shown by God who makes the sun shine on the just and unjust alike."*

This leads us back to where we started: we are all part of God's family. We worship a God whose love and mercy is beyond our comprehension We are all accepted just as we are, and

we will move on in a moment to welcome the new member of that family. Before that, I want to finish with a reminder of the hymn we sang just before I started to speak:

*There's a wideness in God's mercy  
Like the wideness of the sea,  
There's a kindness in his justice  
Which is more than liberty*

*For the love of God is broader  
Than the measure of man's mind,  
And the heart of the eternal  
Is most wonderfully kind.*

**Welcome Aiden to your new family.**

*But we make his love too narrow  
By false limits of our own  
And we magnify his strictness  
With a zeal he will not own.*

*For the love of God is broader  
Than the measure of man's mind,  
And the heart of the eternal  
Is most wonderfully kind*