

LUKE 18:9-14
COMPLACENCY SETS IN!

Do you know the story of the tortoise and the hare? It began a long time ago/ as a fable told by the ancient Greek Aesop. The tortoise and the hare started to dispute which of them was faster. So they arranged to settle the matter once and for all with a race, and the time and the place for a race was agreed. The hare was so sure that he would win without any trouble at all, because he was naturally fast, that he didn't trouble about the race but lay down by the side of the path and fell asleep. The tortoise knew that he was slow but he plodded on and eventually passed the hare lying by the side of the path and without stopping kept going and won the race! Slow but sure wins the race! What was the hare's downfall? Complacency set in and he didn't bother; he thought he had it sorted, but complacency was his downfall and forever in this story the hare is seen as one who threw the race away because he fell asleep!

Today some 2% of Edinburgh's people will be in a church service. That is not a happy statistic! Why is it like that? Now, there are a whole lot of reasons why 98% of the people of the city will have chosen not to be in church and some will be personal reasons and some will be to do with feelings that the church has failed them. But for some, it will be something like this: "We don't need God anymore; we have come of age and our thinking is much more sensible; we can manage things for ourselves and God is irrelevant." Stephen Hawking: "religion is a fairy-story made up for people who are afraid of the dark but we're not afraid of the dark anymore and so we don't need God!" If we wanted to be blunt, that is a spirit of complacency; "we're fine, look how good we are and everything is sorted!" The person who challenges that way of thinking becomes a target for abuse! (John Lennox said "Atheism is a story made up by people who are afraid of the light!")

Jeremiah challenged that way of thinking. He wasn't very popular, either, but he knew he had to speak the Lord's word to the Lord's people, so here goes! "*Although...*" (*Jeremiah 14:7*) Jeremiah is putting words in their mouths. This is what they should be saying to God; this is what Jeremiah is saying to God on behalf of his people. On their behalf, he is acknowledging their sin, their faults and mistakes. But in reality, "*They greatly...*" (*Jeremiah 14:10*) and so God will judge them for their sin. Elsewhere, they tell Jeremiah off for his preaching; "we will be fine because we still have Temple of Lord in our midst and God will not let us go, no matter what!" They still loved to wander and God judged them for their failings and they lost the temple, they lost their homes and their land and were sent into exile for 70 years.

Jesus' story about the Pharisee and the tax-collector is told "*To some...*" (*Luke 18:9*) That complacency is embodied in the character of the Pharisee as Jesus paints him in the story. "*The Pharisee...*" (*Luke 18:11f*) I wonder what words you would use to sum up the spirit in this prayer? Someone has said that "he glances at God but contemplates himself." (Plummer) It is all about himself; it is all about his achievements and how good he is at keeping the rules and about doing his religion. Not only that, but he turns religion into a competition: "I'm better than he is!" as he looks down at the tax-collector. On the outside, the Pharisees were the religious leaders, people who were looked up to, the teachers of religion, role models, but Jesus paints a very different picture of this man on the inside.

The tax-collector is very different. Maybe it is a surprise that he would even be in temple, but Jesus paints him in a very different way. "*But the...*" (*Luke 18:13*) Again, what word would you find to describe the spirit in this prayer? It is a very simple prayer, full of humility. Jesus paints a character who is aware of his faults and failings; who prays from a sense of need; who knows that he is not what he should be and all he can do is to ask God for mercy! Even his body language suggests something: his head is down and he daren't look up; he beat his breast, the action of someone who is full of remorse. Everything about this character suggests a humble man, a man ready to confess his sin and hope beyond hope that God might just see His way to forgive and bless him.

Now you have a choice. Which one will God bless? Which man will God listen to? Which one will have his prayers answered? For most people hearing Jesus' story, the answer is clear – God will bless the religious Pharisee! Jesus' answer is different: *"I tell you..." (Luke 18:14a)* "This man", the tax-collector, the humble man, the penitent man, the man on his knees before God, the man whose head is bowed in humility before God, this man went home "justified", forgiven. Shocking! But the story is all about the difference between the outside and the inside, between people *"confident..." (Luke 18:9)* and people who depended on God, between pride and humility. Being the right kind of person inside matters far more to Jesus; a sense of humble dependence on God is better than pride in our own self-righteousness.

It is still a shocking end to the story. There is still something of the wrong way round! But only if you're looking on the outside. For some of us, we have been coming to church for 50, 60, 70 years; has that all been a waste of time? How many sermons have we listened to? How many prayers have we heard? How many times have we said the Lord's Prayer? How many hymns have we sung? What's been the value of all of that? Go back to our two boxes from earlier, one that was pretty but shut, the other was tattered but open: the value of all of that practice of our religion is the impact it has made on us inside. Has the gospel shaped us as people? Or has it all bounced off us and made no impact on us at all like the Smarties bouncing off the beautiful box? Or has the church created in us a humble spirit, a sense that we depend on God for everything, a sense that we have fallen short and need forgiveness? When we are like that inside, then the Spirit has been at work in us.

"For everyone..." (Luke 18:14b) Jesus turns the world upside down! The world has always wanted to put important people on pedestals; to create celebrities; to honour people who were powerful and strong. But Jesus challenges that, not just by this story but by almost every action in His ministry. Who were the people we hear most about in the gospel stories? The people who saw themselves in need of grace, poor people, those who were sick, people at the end of their tether, aware of their faults and failings, people who came to Him looking for help. The powerful people complained to Jesus about the people He was spending time with, wasting His time with these tax-collectors and sinners. But these humble people, who come looking for grace, are the people whom God promises to bless, those who go home justified, with hearts open to grace from God.

I read these words again the other day; they come from 1 Corinthians chapter 1: *"Brothers, think..." (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)* This was the Church. This reflected the make-up of the church in the early days; Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth of who they were, yet God called them to be His people. Wise, influential, noble, rich, celebrity – it is hard for people like that to be humble, to have a sense of depending on God; they tend to think that they can sort things for themselves and be masters of their own universe. In the eighteenth century, the Countess of Huntingdon was noble, rich, and perhaps something of a celebrity, but was also a great supporter of John Wesley's ministry; she is reputed to have read these words from 1 Corinthians and been glad that Paul said "not *many* were rich" because she saw that some could be noble, rich, important and still be part of church! It is all to do with what we're like inside: are we ready to boast about ourselves? Or are we ready to depend on God with humble hearts?

I wonder if you see yourself in this story. I suppose there are only two options, if you do. Are you ready to admit yourself to be like the Pharisee, *"confident in your own righteousness"*? In which case, your challenge is to beware of complacency, of thinking that everything is sorted and you are in charge of things and there is no need for God; you are better than the rest of us. Are you ready to admit yourself to be like the tax-collector? Is there a humble spirit in your heart, aware of your faults and failings, ready to ask God for grace and forgiveness? That kind of humble spirit is readily admired through the whole of the Bible, as God's people find

their way, find faith, and find grace. What we're like inside matters; the kind of people we are matters more than anything else as we connect with God.

Here's a thing: God lifts up the humble. To a penitent thief Jesus said, "*Today you will be with me in paradise*". The gospel tells us that we have peace with God, He has forgiven our sins, we are reconciled, part of God's family; more than that, He calls us His children, we belong to Him. More than that, He promises that we will share in the glory that belongs to Jesus; we shall see Him face to face; we shall be changed to be like Him. "Lifted up, exalted..." Here is something of what that means. It starts off in a place where we feel tattered and torn, only seeing our faults, our mistakes, the mess we've made of our lives, being humble, deserving nothing from God but hoping... "*For everyone...*" (Luke 18:14)