

“Honesty Before God”

(Luke 18.9-14)

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Introduction

Many years ago now, a big Sydney parish wanted to interview me for their next Rector. They were very insistent, and even though I wasn't at all convinced, I found myself with flights booked, interview scheduled. But two days before, a highly embarrassed chairperson of the selection committee, phoned to cancel. The Diocese of Sydney refused to even let them interview me. They would never ever give *me* a licence. Why? Because I am a divorced man. Even though it had been 15 years previous, it was on the record. It cannot be hidden. I am on public record as a sinner.

I was appropriately concerned on the phone, but as soon as I hung-up I laughed and laughed. How wonderful! The whole world knows I'm a sinner. And what 'they' in their unassailable righteousness will never understand, is the freedom of this 'blessed' state..

Today's gospel explains why....

The Parable (Luke 18.9-14)

There are two parables today...both fabulous...but I'm preaching on the second one. Remember, it's a parable, and parables work by shocking us into unexpected insight. So look for the shock factor...

There are two people in the Temple praying... One is a Pharisee. Now, don't let the Christian propaganda blind you. Pharisees were 'the good people' – pillars of the community... people committed to religious observance and ethical behaviour. Everything he says about himself in his prayer is true – he *does* fast twice a week; he *does* give away 10% of his income. We'd

welcome him into our parish any day! So... let's contemporise the story by calling him the *Solid Churchman*...

The other one is a tax collector...and they were indeed corrupt and disgraceful. They were exploiters, thieves and collaborators. Who would be a modern equivalent?? Perhaps a corrupt banker or politician... something like that. But let's give him an obviously morally dubious title... We'll call him the *Sex Shop Owner*.

The parable is often taught as a moral tale, lauding humility and denigrating pride... and that's *sort* of true...but not really the point. It's far too comfortable ...where's the shock factor in that?

In this parable, the shock to the listeners is that it's the immoral man (the *Sex Shop Owner*) who goes home from worship in healthy connection with God... while the "good" man goes away *disconnected* from God! The *Sex Shop Owner* comes closer to God...while the *Solid Churchman* is distanced! "What??" shouts the crowd! "How can this be?"

The answer is in the prayers they pray... The *Sex Shop Owner*, who is indeed immoral...a sinner... sees and names the true reality of his state. "God be merciful to me, a sinner." That's a prayer of honesty that God can do something with! Whereas the *Solid Churchman* chooses *not* to be honest about who he really is. "I've got all this sorted-out God. I'm making a real success of my life... and you can see how wonderfully faithful I am." He's not only faking it 'out there' on the public stage, he's faking it in the place of prayer...because he's dishonest with himself! And so, even before God he keeps up the pretence...he is essentially un-real before God...and while he behaves like this, prays like this, God can do nothing with him.

And note the strategy used by the *Solid Churchman* to maintain his self-deception. He projects the unconscious shame he feels about himself, outwards... onto the *Sex Shop Owner*. "How terrible he is! Thank God I'm not like that! I'm nowhere near as bad as him!"

Divorce as the Turning Point

That's why my early-life divorce was such a huge turning-point for me in the journey of faith. It *was* very public...and it *was* indeed sinful. No doubt about it. But it changed my life profoundly... because it changed the very basis of my relationship with God.

Before the divorce I was a card-carrying "Pharisee"... squeaky clean... never did anything wrong! Now, of course the hidden truth was a *very* different matter. But I was desperate to maintain the charade... for two reasons:

- I didn't believe others would accept me if I wasn't "perfect";
- and I didn't believe God *could* accept me if I wasn't squeaky clean.

One of my key strategies in maintaining this pretence was an inner voice saying, "*Well at least I'm not as bad as them!*"

Divorce busted-open the whole façade. In terms of this parable, I went instantly from being the Pharisee to the tax collector. In church and family it was a very public humiliation.

And yet to my surprise, God made it very clear *we* were still in relationship – I was anything but rejected and abandoned. Indeed God and I became more strongly connected... closer... because I was forced to get "real". I learned a whole new way of praying... Most importantly, I learned I could be honest before God, about who I *really* am. That was a huge turning-point. Things got moving after that.

Sinner

We recoil at the word 'sin' these days – it carries a whole lot of baggage from the past and it's become entirely unfashionable. But it *is* an entirely helpful word, essential to our Christian vocabulary. Literally translated, it means to 'miss the mark' (an archery metaphor)... and so it means to "fall short of who we were created to be"...to "fall short of the imperative to love." And of course, we are *all* guilty of these failings...every one of us. And so orthodox Christian theology 'happily' says... "*we are all sinners*". We may not feel comfortable with the title, but nevertheless, it is 100% accurate and true.

Also in the tradition, less well-known, is another saying... *"O blessed sin...that set me free."* Not because sin is a good thing... but as Jesus says in today's parable, the 'pretence of perfection' is even worse! So *if* it takes an act of sin to burst the bubble of pretence, (as happened with me), then as horrible as sin is, it's also a blessing.

While we insist on saying *"But we're good people"*...to the exclusion of being honest and real about who we really are... and while we keep replaying that inner tape that says *"At least we're not as bad as them!"*...then we are completely and utterly STUCK! God can do very little with us. Dishonesty effectively closes the door to the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Gift of Honesty

This gospel is not encouraging us to acquire a new game of fake humility. It is "telling it like it is"... not to all and sundry... but at least to ourselves... and certainly to God.

When we take the risk, and practice real self-honesty before God, a range of gifts flow.

1. Firstly...it is a relief, not having to keep up the pretence.
2. Secondly...it does wonders for our relationships...family and community. When we maintain the mask of perfection, we are forced/compelled to project our darkness outwards onto others. Even onto the people we love. It just has to be *their* fault, *their* issue...because whatever happens, it can't be *ours*. So choosing self-honesty instead, cuts-off all that projection at the knees. We just don't need to do it anymore. Relationships blossom in the freedom.
3. Thirdly...it enables us to come home to ourselves. It is wonderful to be able to stand before a mirror and say, *"Yes, this is who I am!"* Warts and all.
4. And most of all, it re-orientates our relationship with God. It literally opens the floodgates to the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

The truth is, God is always relating to the “real us” ... for no one else exists – the perfect ‘us’ is an illusion and God is not fooled. God is always connected to the “real us”.

Today’s parable says, *“Come home to who you really are...and you’ll find God already there!”*