

Sermon – Sunday 27th October 2019 – 9.30 am

On Wednesday morning this week, I spent a couple of hours in an introductory training session for school governors. Most of the over 30 people on the course had taken up their post at the beginning of the Autumn term, which meant that having started in February I felt relatively experienced. Nevertheless, it was an extremely informative and thought-provoking session.

Anecdotally, one of the comments made by the trainer was that when she had started in school governance almost three decades ago, much about the role involved celebrating successes over coffee and cake in the staff room. This feels very far removed from a training course which included discussion of the Nolan Principles governing standards in public life. School governors hold public office and there are expectations about what that means. Once we take on a public responsibility, we become accountable to the general public for the way we conduct ourselves.

Having got into the swing of training, I spent an hour on Wednesday afternoon completing the Church of England's online introductory safeguarding training. This session set the need for safeguarding in the context of historic cases of abuse and systemic failures. Once again, the need for responsibility and accountability to ensure the safety of everyone and most especially children and vulnerable adults is paramount.

So, it was with my mind full of my responsibilities that I was reading this morning's gospel. Did you notice how it opened? "Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."

On one level, it is easy to read this as yet another swipe at the Pharisees. They just don't get it, do they? How they love to create a set of rules to follow, then criticise everyone else for not following them. Thank goodness we're not so hung up on processes, procedures and practices.

Except that as soon as we go down that road, we have failed on two scores. First, we have done exactly what the parable advises us to guard against, because we are trusting that we are the righteous ones, for not being hung up on religious practices, and we are regarding the Pharisees with contempt. But we also find ourselves at odds with so much of what is currently considered to be best practice. In many aspects of public life there are indeed processes, procedures and practices that need to be followed – like the Nolan Principles and safeguarding – and these are surely of significant value.

So what is it, I wonder, that Jesus is getting at when he advises us not to trust in ourselves? And how does this fit in with our need to take responsibility and be accountable in many aspects of our lives?

Let's look a bit more closely at the parable. It really is a classic because, as is so common in the stories Jesus tells, he chooses characters who are almost caricatures. If you will excuse the potential political incorrectness, it is a bit like starting a joke with: "There was an Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scotsman..." Just as in that case we know that the joke is expecting us to have in our minds stereotypical images of those three figures, so with the Pharisee and the tax collector we know what to assume. Ah, Pharisees, they like to make rules to follow and keep them to the letter so that they can feel superior to everyone else. And tax collectors – collective "boo" – they're a dishonest bunch, always extorting money out of law-abiding citizens.

So far, so clear. And then Jesus tells the story of how each of the two characters prays at the Temple. The Pharisee is full of pomposity, thanking God that he is better than other people, and most especially better than the tax collector. He lists his good works, fasting and paying his tithes. The tax collector, on the other hand, throws himself on God's mercy. He acknowledges his sinfulness and places himself in God's hands.

And Jesus tells us, in conclusion, that it is the tax collector who returns home justified, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

But before we move on too quickly, let's be very careful to make sure we have noticed what the parable has said. And what it has not said. Jesus gives no suggestion that the Pharisee is not a righteous man. He does indeed fast, pray and tithe – his life is in many ways exemplary, and he seeks to live a righteous life. And just as importantly, while we hear that the tax collector goes away justified, we don't learn anything about the way he conducts himself thereafter. Whereas Zacchaeus, the tax collector who climbed the tree in order to see Jesus, having met with him became an honest man and gave restitution to those he had wronged, we hear nothing of the sort about this tax collector. We are unsure whether there is any material result to his prayer, throwing himself on God's mercy - whether it results in any changes in his behaviour.

The significant difference between the two characters in this story is exactly what Jesus points out right at the beginning. It is two key things. The first is that the Pharisee appears to be relying on himself so much that he has left no space for God. He believes that his righteousness is something that he can achieve by his own strength. He expresses thankfulness, but gives the sense really he is doing all the work. By contrast the tax collector is acutely aware of his need for God. He recognises instantly that without God's mercy he is lost – and so his prayer is all about restoring his relationship with God, and recognising his dependence on that relationship.

And the second difference is equally important. The Pharisee has written off the tax collector – and many others as well. He has made himself judge and jury, deciding for himself who is beyond God's mercy. And he is wrong. He is wrong to make himself judge and jury. And he is wrong about the gracious generosity of God.

So let's return to some of our own challenges in life. How to accept responsibility, while still leaving space for God.

It strikes me that there is a genuine connection between the training courses I have been on this week and the message of this morning's Gospel reading. There is no sense that in encouraging us to place our trust in God Jesus is suggesting that we should not be accountable for our own actions. Really the call is to recognise that we are better able to bear our responsibilities if we place our trust in the right place. If we recognise our own fallibilities – and those of others – we become more aware of our need to keep on praying, to keep on checking out with people around us that we are heading down the right track. We need checks and balances because we aren't perfect, and it is in our prayer lives that we grow closer to the God who is perfect, which helps us to recognise right from wrong.

One of God's gifts to us is the gift of free will. We have choices, and this means that we must be accountable for the decisions that we make. And we are also given the gift of God's love and the knowledge that in all that we do, we are never beyond God's reach. Amen