

## **'A Searing Honesty' – A Homily for the Last Sunday after Trinity**

*Jeremiah 14.7-10, 19-end*

*Luke 18.9-14*

Last week's readings drew us into a surprising consideration of prayer. Not prayer as an easy comfort, but rather prayer that feels like a confrontation in the dark, a wrestling at midnight, prayer as both a wounding and a blessing, the rapping of knuckles on the unyielding door of an unjust judge, prayer that leaves us limping and bruised, overcome by God's mystery rather than capturing it.

Today we delve a little deeper into these unsettling encounters with the divine, as once more our easy answers and glib platitudes are violently broken apart as we are plunged into a meeting between God and the prophet which is all about abrasion and contradiction, in which prayer becomes a howl of protest and a cry of the heart. And in our Gospel, we hear another parable, one of those disarmingly comic stories of the Jesus who likes to play the fool, setting us off in the wrong direction and chiding our false certainties and easy self-righteousness.

And so first into our Gospel. We often make the mistake with Jesus' parables that he tells them as childlike stories with a simple platitudinous meaning. Strangely though, whenever Jesus is asked why he speaks in parables, he tells his disciples that it is in order that people don't understand. If we are honest with ourselves, we so often think that we have the world and our place within it all sorted, we know the answers to all of the questions, we know how to act and believe and pray. But Jesus' parables challenge all of this: the poke and prod us, they take the familiar and make it strange, they lead us into a blind alley and make us laugh at our misunderstandings, they ask us to relate to their eccentric and outrageous characters only to find ourselves on the wrong side of the story. Constantly they ask us to look again, to think again, to question, doubt and to explore.

Amy-Jill Levine has this to say, 'what makes these parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives.

They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge... When we seek universal morals from a genre that is designed to surprise, challenge, shake up or indict and look for a single meaning in a form that opens to multiple interpretations, we are necessarily limiting the parables, and so, ourselves... We might be better off thinking less about what they “mean” and more about what they can “do”: remind, provoke, refine, confront and disturb.’

So two men go to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax-collector. The first is confident in their prayer and perhaps rightly so, they have been trained in the religious traditions of their day and have the language of prayer readily available to them. They thank God for the generosity and discipline that they know in their daily lives. The second stands far-off, not even looking up to heaven and prays that simple prayer that has become the heart of the Jesus Prayer: ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ We think we know this story so well, but for those first listeners, it wouldn’t have been so obvious.

Despite what we think we know, the Pharisee would not have appeared as a self-righteous and self-important figure, but rather as a priestly figure doing what God had asked of him. And the tax-collector would have been nothing else than a nasty collaborator of Rome, thriving on the unjust economic systems that were oppressing his brothers and sisters, profiting from their misery and suffering. If we are likely to say in response to this parable, “I thank you that I am not like this Pharisee...” then we have utterly missed the point of it.

‘Whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’ Time and again in the Gospels it is the unlikely people who find themselves at the centre of God’s purposes, and those who think they are secure in their privileged positions find themselves sinking without a trace. This is because in prayer, as in everything else, what matters is not our status, our ability, our words, our proficiency, but rather what matters is God’s almost unbelievable generosity and unwarranted welcome. We are always happy to receive God’s grace at the expense of others, but what might our world be if we recognised that God’s grace was like a mighty river in which all could swim, and play and enjoy?

Like the tax-collector in the parable, the prophet in our first reading knows that the only thing that is powerful enough to break himself out of the prison is the undeserved and totally gratuitous grace of God, but for Jeremiah the story is complicated further. Jeremiah's experience of God is an utterly abrasive one, his God does not look at all like Santa Claus and is certainly not the quiet God of hearth and home. This God is a burning fire shut up in the bowels, like one who seduces with false hope, like a dangerous stranger in the land, or a warrior who threatens to give up the fight.

The courageous honesty of the prophet is extraordinary. He manages to see the painful realities of his world, of a society teetering on the edge of collapse, of the very end of history itself, and to bring them to full articulation before God in prayer. More than this, he knows that only God's action can bring relief, healing and reconciliation to his bruised, battered and wayward people, and yet God remains utterly silent and seemingly absent. But the prophet won't let God get away with it, time and time he comes back to his dangerous and beloved foe, reminding him of his promise and pleading with him to act: 'Can any of idols of the nations bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Is it not you, O Lord, our God? We set our hope on your, for it is you who do all this.

What our parable and prophet teach us today is that authentic prayer demands utter honesty and truthfulness. If we can bear to start where we actually are – broken and bruised in a world that makes no sense and displays no justice – rather than in some fantasy place of where we might like to be, then perhaps, just perhaps, God will meet us there and the floodgates of mercy will open up once more.