

O God of our salvation, you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. (Psalm 65.5).

The theme of salvation runs deep through scripture.

It is the background to Jesus Gospel parable.

We start today with one of Luke's many teachings on prayer. In the Gospel parable, Jesus describes two men coming to the house of GOD to pray.

Luke is a physician, a doctor. He understands that prayer is both a good and healthy thing to do. Prayer is a form of reflection. It gives us the opportunity to sit down with ourselves, our deepest hopes and fears and questions, and articulate them to GOD. It is a process of ordering our thoughts and intentions. As Socrates famously said at his trial, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' We might put it this way, 'The life of prayer is essential to human being'.

Prayer is a way of being with our deepest selves.

In today's Gospel parable, Jesus describes two men coming to the house of GOD to pray.

One is full of self-justification and full of himself.

The other empties himself of pride and excuses and, from a distance, he asks GOD for mercy.

One hangs out with religious people.

The other hangs out with other tax collectors.

The first man, the Pharisee, cannot be with himself. He cannot look honestly at himself. All his attention is deflected onto others. He compares himself to others. He criticizes others. 'I am better than them', he says. 'They are useless, bad, fickle, corrupt, they count for nothing. Thank GOD I'm not one of them.'

The first man, the Pharisee, thinks his show of good deeds will impress GOD, **¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."**

The second man, the tax collector, digs deep. He sits with himself. He sees his failings. He empties himself of pride, he asks for GOD's mercy.

His occupation as a tax collector forces him to make impossible and unavoidable choices between his own interests and the interests of others. To avoid bankruptcy and destitution, he resorts to extorting money from others. He may never have chosen to become a tax collector, but with all other options exhausted, it was all that was left to him. He collaborates with the occupation and extorts taxes from his own people on their behalf. He despises who he has become. He knows he is unworthy. He keeps his distance from the Temple, he will not even look up to heaven.

But the tax collector has one thing on his side. He is honest. He faces honestly who he has become. He names his predicament before GOD, he begs GOD for mercy,

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Just like the ten lepers in Luke 17 who approached Jesus from a distance and call out,

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Just like the blind man in Luke 19, begging by the roadside,

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Just like Zaccheus in Luke 19, hiding in a tree, who turned to Jesus.

Just like us when we pray, **'LORD, in your mercy; hear our prayer.'**

When we cry to GOD for help, it is like a magnet to GOD.

It positions us to receive the Kingdom of GOD as a child.

It brings us to ourselves, naked as a newborn.

It unblocks all our years of denial and pretence, our efforts at self-improvement.

When we cry to GOD for mercy, it's because we realise our good works, our good character and standing, will not save us.

The most famous verse in the Bible tells us how we shall be saved:

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

We are saved by love. Love and love alone saves us.

This is the message of the Gospel, this is the message of the church.

That love alone saves us. Love alone delivers us from our worst fears, our darkest night. It makes us whole.

God didn't send Jesus so we could become better improved, versions of ourselves. So we could criticise others and say, 'Well, at least I'm not one of them.'

God sent Jesus to save us. To be born anew in us.

The Bible consistently records that life without GOD is incomplete.

Every week we confess our spiritual poverty. As the song says,

It's me, it's me, O LORD, standing in the need of prayer. Not my brother or my sister ... not the stranger or my neighbour, not the preacher or the deacon. But me. It's me, it's me, O LORD, standing in the need of prayer.

Every week we receive GOD's forgiveness.

Life without GOD is incomplete.

Back to the parable, the end of the parable. Jesus deliberately leaves this Parable open-ended, with questions. It is open-ended for a reason, to make us think and reflect.

At the end of the parable, we never know whether the tax collector received assurance of GOD's love. We never find out if he knew he was forgiven. It does not say he went on his way rejoicing.

Did the tax collector find a church that proclaimed GOD's love and forgiveness and offered the hope of healing?

Did he find a church built on mercy and kindness where he was drawn to find Jesus for himself?

Did the tax collector find peace with himself and GOD?

Or did he simply go back to his house, still beating his breast, not daring to look up to heaven? In a worse place than before he went?

How sad when we stay away from GOD and love and the church because we think that we are not good enough, that GOD would never love us as we are.

How sad when we think we have to pull our socks up before we can even approach God.

How sad when pride and stubbornness get in our way and we think we know better than GOD!

God love us to bits. God says we are worthy. God says we matter.

We will never change GOD's mind on that, no matter how much we cling on to the false narratives we tell ourselves, that we are unworthy. We are loved. We are worthy. We matter. God says so.

Nothing we do can make GOD love us more.

We are made to be in relationship with GOD.

We are made to know our maker.

To receive Jesus.

It's not about pulling our socks up; it's about asking GOD for mercy.

And like a magnet, when we do that, GOD is drawn to our cry for help. It's what saves us and makes us whole again. Puts everything back in perspective.

It's me, it's me, O LORD, standing in the need of prayer. Not my brother or my sister ... not the stranger or my neighbour, not the preacher or the deacon. But me. It's me, it's me, O LORD, standing in the need of prayer.

O God of our salvation, you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. (Psalm 65.5).

Or as the prophet Joel said to the people of GOD in a time of national distress (Joel 2.32),

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Christ came to build a community based on radical love, where publican and sinner, tax collector and rogue, robber and adulterer and Pharisee are all made to feel welcome.

Christ came for a church based on mercy and kindness where people can find Jesus for themselves.

He came to be born in us today.

In know it's early, but let's close with a few lines from a Christmas carol,

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.*

*No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.*