

“LOOK AT ME!”

Luke 18:9-14

It's been time to put away the Christmas cards this week. They've all been piled up ready to go to the recycling, but some of them had letters in and they've been put to one side to read again when we've got a moment. Most of them are nice, newsy accounts of what's been happening during the year from people we don't see very often, so it's good to keep in touch. One or two of them, though, were just exercises in boasting – all about how far they've been promoted this year, what amazing things they've done to their house, how wonderful the children are and what amazing qualifications and achievements they've got – how the oldest child's won a Nobel Prize, Daddy's discovered a cure for cancer and the dog's learned the bagpipes: all that kind of thing.

And some people are like that all the time, aren't they? They love to talk about themselves and all the good things they're up to. They like to let everyone know just how much they improve life for everyone else, how clever they are and how much God has blessed them in all kinds of amazing ways. What is often most annoying is that you know it's all true – you just get really fed up hearing about it!

That's a bit like the first person Jesus mentioned in that story we just heard. This man was a Pharisee – a pillar of the community who behaved impeccably and did all kinds of good deeds around the place. He kept to the law in every way – even to the amount of money he gave away and the number of times he did good religious things each week. He was generally all round awesome. He very probably liked everyone to see it as well.

And that spilled over into his prayers. He tells God just how wonderful he is – as if God didn't know already. When he went up to the Temple – a bit like our cathedral – he drew himself upright and let rip. He thanked God for who he was – fair enough – but was a bit snooty about other people. “Thank you, God, that I'm not one of those nasty people who does bad things” – and he mentions one or two examples, just in case God wasn't really getting the gist of it all. I suspect he wasn't alone in praying like this – it was a great way to get noticed – you stood up in the Temple and you prayed out loud in those days, so other people could probably hear how good he was just in case they hadn't noticed. (There are still prayers very similar to this in a book called *The Talmud* from the 1st century, so he wasn't the only person to behave like this.) And he *was* good. He did keep the law and all that kind of thing. He gave away 10% of his income. And, as he looked around he spotted someone else praying – and he told God how glad he was that he wasn't like that little bloke over there.

That little bloke over there was actually a tax collector. Now there are people here this morning who work for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and they are very nice, respectable people. This man

wasn't. Because of the way taxes were collected back in Jesus' day the tax collectors were little more than swindlers and extortionists who were working for the enemy, fleecing their fellow citizens and sucking up to the Romans. And everybody hated them, naturally. He was probably quite rich and lived quite comfortably, but he'd made his money at the expense of his own people and that was why they despised him. He was nothing like the respectable Pharisee who was praying so ostentatiously over there. He huddled himself in a corner and muttered his prayers, desperate for God to forgive him.

The tax collector is acutely aware of his shortcomings. He knows he's done wrong. He needs God to show him mercy. What he wants is not the approval of the people around him, but the forgiveness of God. He is humble and recognises his need of help.

So which one went home with a spring in his step and a sense that God loved him? You'd think it would be the first man, the Pharisee, because he did everything right and was a very respectable man. But Jesus says that's not the case. As we've seen so often when we've been looking at Matthew's story of Jesus' life recently, with God things don't always turn out as we'd expect. Jesus says the Pharisee "*exalted himself*" – he was a bit too sure of himself and went a bit too far in blowing his own trumpet. He thought he could rely on his own resources and forgot that he needed God.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was humble and realised that he needed God to help him. He knew deep down that he needed God's forgiveness because he hadn't lived as God wanted him to. The Pharisee hadn't either – he was proud and boastful, if nothing else – but he appeared to think that he didn't need God's help. Later on the New Testament, Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome and told them that everyone has done something wrong and therefore needs God's help and God's forgiveness. Until we recognise that, we can't really make any progress and we certainly can't look forward to spending eternity with God.

This morning you might be here as a wonderful human being – everything in your life is wonderful and everyone thinks you're great – and you may well be right. But you can't live without God's help any more than the meanest, worst behaved, most despicable person who's ever lived. We all need to ask for God's help to live as he wants, and to ask for his forgiveness for those things we've done wrong, those hasty words and thoughtless actions, those secret thoughts and bad attitudes. And that's what we're going to do now.