

On Innocence (Luke 18. 9-17)

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I said last week that this section of Luke's gospel is concerned with what it means to inhabit the new reality Jesus has been announcing, the new pattern of personal and social life that he calls the 'kingdom of God'. How may we become open to what God is doing and be changed by it? How do we persist in the way Jesus teaches, even when it seems to be getting us nowhere, and our doubts and fears crowd in? So far we've seen that, according to Luke, key dispositions in the life of faith include our desire for healing and justice; they include courage – the willingness to risk ourselves to the way; they include perseverance and thankfulness. In the last couple of weeks, we've been exploring how in fact these dispositions do enable our access to the gospel's promise of healing and transformation.

Today's passage continues in a similar vein. The two stories we've just read are supposed to add to our picture of what it means to be receptive to the action and gift of God. But there's something a little troubling to our contemporary sensibilities here. Are we really to take the repentant, self-abasing tax collector as our model? He sounds a little neurotic. That religiously induced guilt complex, that lack of self-esteem – surely a good therapist would tell him not to be so hard on himself? And as for those 'little children'? Aren't we rightly concerned about religion's infantilising propensity? The sense that adherents, all too often, do remain at some level immature, susceptible to domination, wanting 'daddy-God' to relieve them of full adult responsibility in a world come of age? What is supposed to be liberating, empowering, inspiring about these models for being? In what sense, is Jesus suggesting they help us to be disposed for fullness of life?

I want to suggest they each point to the necessity of giving up self-dependence and the importance of a certain kind of innocence. But these are dangerous notions, easily corrupted. So let's see what we might make of them.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Luke tells us, was addressed by Jesus ‘to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt’. Perhaps Jesus had in mind some in the religious establishment of his day – and ours. Perhaps also he’s noted tendencies in his own followers – the disciples becoming inclined to think themselves better than ‘ordinary’ folk. So he paints a picture of a Pharisee who is a paradigm of self-righteous religiosity. In the English translation, this Pharisee is said to be standing *by himself* and praying; the Greek could also suggest that he was standing and praying *to himself*. His prayer begins in promising and traditional form, with thanksgiving. ‘O God, I thank you ...’, after which says one commentator ‘it quickly veers off into an insidious comparison’. ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector’. It’s been called a ‘portrait of prayer with peripheral vision’, one eye on the Joneses, self-congratulatory and self-reinforcing.¹

The tax collector in the story acts in contrast in nearly every way. He, it’s said, is ‘standing far off’ and ‘would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner”!’ (Luke 18.13). In the Pharisee’s supposed prayer, the majority of the text (29 out of 36 words) is devoted to its self-congratulatory *content*. [Methinks he protesteth too much!]. The tax collector, on the other hand, prays briefly and simply – only six words. Rather than focus on what he says, ‘nineteen of the twenty-nine words used to portray the tax collector are devoted to a description of his *posture* in prayer’.² And Jesus approves of him.

At one level, the point seems obvious. Self-righteousness and complacent self-satisfaction get in the way of the possibility of listening, growth, transformation. They enclose you within yourself – which incidentally is Martin Luther’s definition of sin. If you really want to get closer to the living God and be changed by the encounter, then a radically more open-hearted, humble and self-exposing posture is

¹ Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), pp.265-266.

² Parsons, *Luke*, pp.266-267.

required. But though the point is obvious, and we recognise its truth, it seems to me that it's not at all easy actually to shift from being like the Pharisee to becoming in any authentic yet non-neurotic sense like 'the tax collector'. And in thinking about this difficulty, I've been helped by reflecting on the spiritual significance of two contrasting conceptions of 'innocence'.

There's a common religious aspiration to innocence that's to do with being – and being thought to be – blameless, guiltless. In his book, *Against Innocence*, theologian Andrew Shanks expresses his suspicion of our desire to be innocent in this sense because it tends inherently to self-justification and self-consciousness.³ This is the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, and I know him in myself. Someone asks if I've done something I said I'd do, and I'm immediately full of reasons why it hasn't happened, and why it's not my fault. Someone expresses disappointment or annoyance with me, and before I know it my thoughts are suffused with defensiveness and blame. Or sometimes, I do what I know is just – and though there's part of me that genuinely desires the good for its own sake – I'm not quite free of that 'peripheral vision' that sees the good I do and is pleased with it, feels myself justified by it. It's as if I cannot escape myself looking back at myself, evaluating myself, comparing myself. John Main wrote: 'I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that original sin is self-consciousness, because self-consciousness gives rise to divided consciousness. This is like having a mirror between God and ourselves, [between reality and ourselves]. Every time we look into the mirror we see ourselves'.⁴ Remember the Pharisee – standing in the temple and praying to himself.

But there's a second notion of innocence, which is not so much to do with blamelessness or guiltlessness, but with unselfconsciousness, guilelessness, one-pointedness, child-likeness. Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard spoke of 'purity of heart' which is 'to will one thing'. John Main speaks of this 'purity of heart' in terms of 'undivided consciousness', a 'state of simplicity that is the fully mature development

³ Andrew Shanks, *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose's Reception and Gift of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

⁴ John Main, *Moment of Christ*, edited by Laurence Freeman (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010), p.50.

of our original innocence'.⁵ In this state, which is perhaps analogous to what the Buddhist tradition calls 'beginner's mind' and what St Paul means by 'possessing the mind of Christ', we are simply present to what is – our awareness 'unclouded', unrefracted 'by egoism' and so fully transparent to the love at the source of all things. This is to receive the kingdom of God, 'as a little child'.

The question is, how do we attain to this undivided consciousness? How do we break free of the self-justifying and self-referencing Pharisee in ourselves, who gets in the way of the truer love we long to dwell in and share? Because the problem is that the more I try to break myself free and the more scrupulous I become about my state of mind, the more I'm entangled in the very self-consciousness that holds me fast. We cannot think or strive our way out of this, because the self that thinks and strives will reproduce its own dividedness. And here, I think, might be the significance of the brevity of the tax collector's prayer. He doesn't go on and on, endlessly analysing or criticizing himself, explaining or reforming himself. He just brings his helpless awareness of himself, acknowledging that by himself he's incapable of being differently: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'.

The desert tradition calls this profound awareness of our dividedness 'compunction'. Often accompanied by the gift of tears (think of the tax collector 'beating his breast'), compunction is that piercing of the heart where we see it. It shows up 'the idealistic, perfectionist, and neurotic self for what it really is: ... false and fraudulent ... – an imposter'.⁶ Alan Jones says that the gift of tears 'frees the soul from the lying and the pretense', the compulsive self-justification, 'that tend to dominate us when we are frightened, anxious, or insecure'.⁷ And in the end, these tears, this piercing of the heart, leads not to self-loathing and self-blame, but to freedom and joy. 'The truly penitent is "baptized" again', writes Jones, 'in his or her own tears, which represent the tears of truth and insight breaking in and flooding the

⁵ Main, *Moment of Christ*, p.55.

⁶ Alan Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), pp.84-85.

⁷ Jones, *Soul Making*, p.85.

soul with new life'.⁸ 'I tell you', Jesus says, 'this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted'.

We cannot manufacture true compunction or force the cleansing gift of tears. Like the reconciliation they bring, they are grace, gift. But we can dispose ourselves to be awakened and to be receptive. We can begin to recognise the futility and smallness of our self-justifying habits and, as best we can, practise letting them go. We can welcome the children among us and the child within us who is vulnerable, dependent, longing to be loved. And in our time of meditation, we can practise turning our gaze beyond ourselves. Says John Main: 'In the simplicity of meditation beyond all thought and imagination we begin to discover ... that we are in God' and 'in simple, loving union with God'. This is the freedom simply to be and the power to love. As Catherine of Genoa expressed it, in this state, 'My me is God. Nor do I know myself save in him'.⁹

⁸ Jones, *Soul Making*, p.85.

⁹ Main, *Moment of Christ*, p.55.