



“the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of existence”

Today, churches get to choose: to celebrate *Bible Sunday*, with the special focus of giving thanks for the Bible as the Word of God, or instead as what it is chronologically – the Last Sunday after Trinity. The choice determines the readings, and we’ve opted for keeping it simply as the Last Sunday after Trinity.

As you may have spotted, today’s Collect (that’s the prayer for the day) does reference Holy Scripture, using that wonderfully rhythmic prayer from the pen of the 16thC Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, urging us to “*hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest*” the message and wisdom of the Christian Bible.

I am slightly relieved by this choice, and some here may share that relief, since the Bible can be problematic. It needs to be approached with care, never (if I can get away with saying this...) taken as gospel. There are many reasons for not regarding it as the *literal* Word of God. Some followers do, of course, and a good deal of argumentative Christianity arises as a result. A good deal of suffering, too.

If I can take the risk of speaking for us here, the consensus is that the Bible is to be taken seriously but not literally, and that we have no choice but to seek to interpret it as best we can, critically, even sceptically, and in the light of what our lived experience tells us about this God whom we seek. Anyhow, as we’re not keeping Bible Sunday, that is not the theme today, so we better leave it at that.

But sometimes the gospel appears to speak perfectly well for itself. On those occasions the first impulse should be to leave it well

alone. Why muddle it by an attempt to expound or explain. Today’s story from Luke could be such an example. It is short, clear and carries no unnecessary content. I am willing to believe that Jesus spoke and taught in this way. No wonder people followed him and listened.

I don’t know if we have any visiting Pharisees with us today. If we do, I reckon some kind of apology should be offered. They get a rough press. Of course both Pharisees and tax collectors fall victim to our liking of stereotypes. We would be hard pressed to communicate with one another without having at our disposal a clutch of shorthand codes and clichés, including those about groups, tribes and types of other people.

The idea of righteousness is central to Luke’s story this morning. The concept is to be found also in Islam and Hinduism as well as Judaism. It is generally understood to mean that a person’s actions are pleasing to one’s God or Gods. That they ‘fit’. They go with the grain of God, not against.

Yet righteousness is only a short hop away from ‘self-righteous’. A short hop but a vastly different condition, as Luke seems to be pointing out. The self-righteous, we say (pointing ever-so slightly haughtily in any direction but our own) are those with an unfounded certainty that they are right – and right-on. We could throw in the word ‘smug’. We might throw in a good many words, since sometimes we are rather good at self-righteously criticising the self-righteous... It’s a slippery slope.

Do you think there is more self-righteousness around these days? It’s hard to tell. Perhaps

there are simply more channels for its expression.

Ena Sharples was the caretaker of the Glad Tidings Mission Hall in TV's Coronation Street in the 1960s and 70s, and along with characters like Albert Tatlock, spent much of her time criticising the activities and loose morals of the street's other residents. The element of self-righteousness made for (I suppose) good television viewing. Today, that same impulse to flame others carries further than the snug at the Rovers Return and can go global in seconds. We're living in changed times, you and I, and we need to struggle to develop new insights as a result, probably new self-restraints, too.

I was away last Sunday, as it happened at a church in Sheffield attending the baptism of two great nephews, and so missed Lucy's sermon in which she spoke of modern forms of communication which amount to endless ranting, and of experimental models of conversations and debates that restore some elements of conversation and true listening.

There is pressure today on speakers of all sorts to provoke and impress and this can run the risk of a bit of self-righteousness. Preachers run this risk all the time. And we all appear to get it by the sack-load across, it seems, all media platforms. Much of the Brexit stuff is proving a great playground for stereotyping and self-righteousness. Where we feel under pressure to have opinions and to broadcast them, our inner Pharisee is likely to be let off the lead. Indeed, modern trends in broadcasting appear to require it.

Whether there is more of it around or not, it remains a pesky critter to be kept under control. Self-righteousness affects not just human hearts but organisations and nations. We all can get self-righteous at times. It can be a bore in people; it can become dangerous in groups and between nation states.

Let's listen again to today's short and pithy Gospel:

"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying like this, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'" [Luke 18.9-14]

I suggested that it all seemed clear and plain, and did not need too much thinking about. Maybe that's not entirely true.

We've spotted that it deals in stereotypes, and when we spot that in any setting it should ring alarm bells: stereotypes distort truth and harm identity. And the story particularly holds fast to the view of Pharisees as hypocritical legalists. Yet the first century historian Josephus says the Pharisees - considered the most expert and accurate expositors of Jewish law - received the backing and good-will of the common people. There is no suggestion by Luke that the Pharisee here is guilty of hypocrisy.

Perhaps an approach to this story is to ask why each player feels the need to pray in the way they do, and to look beyond their actions and ask what shapes them.

That's a pretty modern perspective. Behaviour is a function of experience, we say. We moderns have a better grasp of human conflicts and insecurities and fears, and of the possible effects of trauma. Sometimes self-regarding behaviour and insistent virtue-signalling and a certain over-confidence find their driver and source in just the opposite.

Sometimes self-denigration and a rampant modesty find their root in unacknowledged, unmet, needs and wounds.

In some way or other, these things are true of most of us, however well concealed (we might even say entombed) they are. We are complicated, often conflicted creatures (as well as wondrous, beautiful ones), and so were our forebears. We've got no business writing others' off, not least because we believe that God does not write any of us off.

At the risk of sounding like a TV soap script myself, and quoting that pair of well-known biblical scholars Lennon and McCartney, '*all you need is love*'. Not in the narrow or emaciated or hot and sweaty senses in which we tend to employ that term, but in the sense of an orientation, a way of seeing and believing and apprehending and acting; a concern for the good of another – all others – and a wholesome concern for our own best good. I have always valued the observation made by the German Jewish psychologist Erich Fromm, that despite all its difficulties "*love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of existence*".

I think I'd want to pair that with another quote I value (source unknown), attributed to a Mrs Clark, 7th grade teacher (though I have no idea where), who is said to have explained to her pupils that "God made us washable." The more I ponder that, the more I like it.

All our sincere attempts at prayer, whether we are by temperament and history parked in the Pharisee corner or the Tax Collector corner of Luke's story, seem to make us washable. Maybe that's a serviceable substitute for the more technical idea of being changed by grace.

Today's Collect by Cranmer seems to offer another take on this claim that the only way to engage with the world, its occupants and our deepest selves, is through a loving orientation, which uses both heart and mind.

Those Cranmerian ascending verbs – 'hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' are arranged so as suggest a progression from initial, superficial engagement with life's truths to the deepest, maybe most transformative reception of them in the soul, in the heart, mind and will.

You may have experienced that kind of progression yourself in some subject or other that you have set about studying. Yet no subject compares to that of life's meaning and purpose, which we Christians suspect, believe, is rooted in and through the figure of Jesus and the God to whom he witnessed. That is why life is rightly understood as an adventure, in which we are likely to find (as many of our most impressive sisters and brothers have found) that "love is [indeed] the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of existence" and that, wonderfully, mysteriously and in some endlessly ever deeper way, "God made us washable." Amen.

Hugh Valentine