

God be merciful*Joel 2:28-29; Luke 18:9-14*

If you were to be asked which item of Church furniture best represented the reformed tradition of the Church of Scotland, what would you say? Would it be the pulpit, the place from which, Sunday by Sunday, we share God's Word as I try to explain not only its meaning but also its relevance. Perhaps you might say the font, where infants, and adults, are welcomed into the family of the Church through the Sacrament of Baptism. Or would you say the Communion Table, where we gather to hear the story of Jesus' love and sacrifice, which embraces all who decide to follow Him? Some might suggest the organ (only broadly introduced in Scotland in the late C19th) which provides music for hymns through which Scottish congregations sing their faith. Or the lectern, the resting place from which God's Word is read? Or the offering bags into which, symbolically, we make real our commitment to God's Church through our giving?

Just after the Reformation in 1560 there was another piece of furniture, often placed directly beneath the pulpit. The Stool of Repentance, where sinners were made to sit on Sundays in full view of the congregation and repent their wrongdoing. Some churches had so many sinners repenting that they created a bench for them to sit on. A sort of sofa of sin. In other churches there was a pillar near the pulpit at the front of the church, where penitents were made to stand. Look at all the pillars in here, in full view. We could have a field day!

Penitents were often made to wear sackcloth, and with the nature of their sin written on a piece of paper and pinned on, or a special hat made of paper with the sin written upon it. The importance of visibility was underlined. Often they were made to stand at the Church door, then brought into the Church to their allotted place. An important symbol. Infants were brought into

the Church by the Church door, baptised, and incorporated into the Church family, exiting the by the Church door, a member of the Body of Christ. So too with Penitents. Visible at the door and throughout the service, confessing their sins before the congregation, and begging the pardon of anyone they had offended or maligned, before eventually leaving by the same door fully restored, and forgiven, and shown mercy.

Penitents were not a spectacle to be mocked, but a visible example of, 'be sure your sins will find you out', and that wrongdoing always has a price to pay for sin. But also a recognition of God's mercy within a congregation to whom God had also shown mercy. In a world given over to judgement and condemnation God moves us on to the possibility of mercy and transformation. In Luke's Gospel we read the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector and God's mercy. "Parables are like fishing lures: they are full of attractive features - feathers, bright colours - and they end with a sharp little hook!" This parable seems straightforward and bracing and talks about the dangers of spiritual pride and the need for confession.

Which of the two characters do you identify with most?

Which of us has not felt a bit self-satisfied. "O Lord, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: my friend who is a church member playing golf right now and not at worship; my work colleague with all her degrees and not an ounce of commonsense; that family with their screaming infant when mine were quiet as mice; that scruffy looking young person two rows over. I'm here on Sunday mornings; my Gift-Aid offering is ok; I serve on a church rota." And what about that Donald Trump, or Keir Starmer, or Kemi Badenoch, or John Swinney, or Ed Davey, or Nigel Farage, or Prince Andrew. And that Derek Browning. At least I'm not like any of them!

For others it is only when we get it wrong in a big way that we gain the humility of the tax collector. Those in recovery programmes for addiction or poor mental health issues talk about 'hitting rock

bottom'. Major mistakes began to help them see their needs. If they had faith their need for God's grace and forgiveness. Only then do they echo the tax collector's words, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

These days confession is private, not public. Who would be comfortable sitting on our stool of repentance today, and say sorry for our sins?

For me the point of Jesus' little story is that both men were in it were in need of forgiveness. It is not simply about what they had done, or not done; it was about their attitude to themselves, and to God; and then what needed to happen next. Not all pharisees were bad, and not all tax collectors were model citizens.

Might it be the case that if you are in denial about your wrong-doing or wrong-speaking or wrong-thinking, then there's something needing to be addressed about your self-awareness and honesty with yourself, and God? And equally, if your life is spent in the 'woe is me for I have sinned' mode and you've never moved on, what maybe needs addressing there?

I wonder if the truth is that most of us oscillate between the two. Not that we necessarily go from one **extreme** to the other, but that sometimes our lack of awareness of what we say, think and do and the effect it has on others, on ourselves, and on God, is damaging us. You don't need to be a monster of depravity to wound someone with a look, a thought, a word, a cold shoulder. Equally, constantly beating yourself up about how bad a person you are, and how hypocritical you are, and how no-good you are is also damaging and soul-destroying, and maybe also an unconscious distraction tactic to keep you from beginning to sort yourself out and addressing the things that are not right in your life and your behaviour.

In Jesus' parable - both of the men needed to learn more about themselves, and about God in their lives. Though doing good things, the Pharisee displayed that his life appeared devoid of the

very relationships that faith expects. Where is his love of God and love for his neighbours? How can he love God when he is so full of himself, knowingly and unknowingly? How can he love his neighbours when all he can see are their shortcomings? There is no point in keeping the letter of the law of faith if you do not keep the spirit of that faith too.

The tax-collector is almost cripplingly aware of his sinfulness and brokenness, and has such a devastatingly low self-esteem that one is left wondering, even with God's help, will he ever be able to look up, stand up, and get on with his life as God intended?

However, he does recognise his need of God, and his growing if numbing awareness that he's not going to re-engage with life without God's mercy. *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."* Yes, spiritually, he was further ahead than the self-righteous pharisee with his well-intentioned good actions. But the tax collector also needed to move on from his heartfelt confession, go back to his home, his work, his life, and put God's mercy into practice. It had to show. And also, it's not going to do the tax collector any good if, having been shown mercy, he cries out, "God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee!"

One of the challenges for Christians is not only to accept God's forgiveness, but to show in our living what that forgiveness looks like and what it does. Nothing to boast about, but surely something to put into practice and show.

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest, professor and theologian. When we think about God's mercy, and the new beginning it offers to us, Nouwen asked this: *"Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love?" These are the real questions. I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will be many fruits, here in this world and the life to come."*

When God forgives you, shows mercy to you, does it show in your redoubled efforts to be better, and to do better?

In this scratchy little story Jesus told - is it the case that it is not an either/or between Pharisee and Tax Collector? Might it be a both/and? Perform acts of kindness and generosity which the Pharisee did. But also pray like the tax collector recognising that your motivation and need for help, and recognising things aren't right in your life needs God's correction, encouragement, transformation and mercy.

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

Be embraced by it, accept it, then go out into your life and live it, so that others might see and benefit, and God might see that you have understood the nature of His love for you.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen