

The Church (1) - as a home for sinners

(St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, 25 October 1998)

(Readings: Joel 2:23-32; Luke 18:9-14)

On this and the next three Sunday mornings I shall be talking about what the church is, what God means a community of Christians like ourselves to be like. I shall not do this very systematically because I'm going to take my cue from the readings on each Sunday, but if we look at the readings with this question in mind - what really is the church? - then I think we'll find there will be a lot to learn each Sunday from the particular Scriptures the lectionary gives us each week. This morning I shall talk mainly about our Gospel reading from Luke, but also a little about the Old Testament reading from Joel.

What makes the church the church? What makes a body of people like ourselves the church of Christ? The short answer, of course, is God. It's obvious but too easily forgotten. We are the people God has chosen and called to be God's people, to live for God and for others, to be God's witnesses in the world - in St Andrews in our case. We are not just some group of likeminded people who choose to come together to pursue common interests, some sort of club. We are not just the local branch of a big institution. Nor are we just individuals who serve and worship God each individually and just happen to meet when come to worship. We are God's people, called together by God to worship him together, to serve him together. God makes the church the church. But, more specifically, in what way? We shall discover two answers this morning (and others later). Today's answers are: God's forgiveness makes the church the church, and God's Spirit makes the church the church.

Let me first read you a somewhat expanded version of Jesus' parable that we heard in our Gospel reading. Imagine yourselves in the temple in Jerusalem. It's the time of the afternoon sacrifices, when crowds of people come to the temple to pray. Among the crowd we notice, first, a Pharisee. He prays: 'I thank you, God, that I am not like the rest of mankind - greedy, dishonest, adulterous - or like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week and I pay tithes on all that I get.' Not far from the Pharisee we notice a visitor from the late twentieth century. He's really there as a tourist, but since he was looking round the temple when the crowds were assembling to pray, he offers a prayer himself: 'God, I thank you,' he says, 'that I'm a broad-minded and tolerant person. Everyone has their own moral standards; and it's not for me to judge. But thank God I'm not like that narrow-minded bigot over there, that Pharisee.' And finally, we see the tax-collector, not even raising his eyes to heaven, but beating his breast, saying, 'God have mercy on me, a sinner.' It was this man, not either of the others, who left the temple justified in the sight of God. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled by God; and all who humble themselves will be exalted by God.

I put the second character in, because I think today it's probably much too easy to sneer at the Pharisee. For Jesus' original audience the Pharisee would be a thoroughly admirable person. But he doesn't usually seem too attractive a figure to people nowadays. Priding oneself on one's moral rectitude and one's strict religious observances - yes, there are still people who do that. It's still a temptation for all of us to feel a bit superior, perhaps because we're in church this morning instead of

reading the Sunday papers in bed, or whatever. But generally in our society people are pretty relaxed and indulgent about other people's moral failings. (Of course, some things still put people beyond the pale. Child-molesting, for instance. If you want to feel morally superior, there's always *somebody* to feel superior to. There's always a tax-collector if you need one.) But on the whole I think people dislike self-righteousness more than they care about theft or adultery, let alone fasting and tithing. It's easy enough to read this parable and think: Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee.

But really the Pharisee's mistake is *comparing himself with other people*. He's supposed to be praying, but he's not really thinking of God at all. He's looking round at all the other people and he's thinking: I'm superior to them. His righteousness is a way of exalting himself, making himself significant, and denigrating other people. Our broadminded twentieth-century visitor has a different way of feeling superior, but he's doing just the same thing: measuring his own worth by comparing himself with others. There are lots of ways of doing that. Self-promotion is more or less expected of people in our society. You don't get a job unless you can sell yourself as better than the next person.

The Pharisee prays as though he though he's writing his job application. He's got to sell himself to God, he imagines, and that means comparing himself favourably with everyone else. So he doesn't really encounter God in his prayer at all. He's too preoccupied with comparing himself with others. God is just the audience he needs to confirm his own view of himself, so he thinks. Notice that the tax-collector *doesn't* compare himself with others. The tax-collector doesn't say, 'Lord, I'm so much worse than all these other people. I'm sorry I haven't lived the way that Pharisee does.' The tax-collector isn't making comparisons. He just knows that in God's sight he's unworthy. The tax-collector really meets God and he knows that the only appropriate attitude to take is: 'God have mercy on me a sinner.'

Comparing oneself with others can work two ways. Some people, like the Pharisees, bolster their own sense of self-worth by feeling superior to others. Other people, of course, lack a sense of self-worth, they feel inferior. What the parable is telling us is that when it comes to our relationship with God, it's not comparing ourselves with others that matters. Self-worth is finally a matter of how God values us, and before God self-worth is an all or nothing matter. Before God, none of us has a leg to stand on. Self-promotion before God is simply ridiculous. But also, before God, each of us is given the immeasurable value of being someone God loves.

Before God we must all abandon all the inflated ideas of ourselves that we can get by feeling superior to others. There's no room for - 'I may not be perfect, but at least I'm better than she is.' There's no room for - 'At least I've tried my best (meaning: and I know people who haven't even done that).' Before God's total demand that we live entirely for God these comparisons are petty, and they get in the way of really meeting the true God, on whom none of us has any claim at all. Not until we clear them away, not until we are able to be simply who we are before God, not promoting ourselves by disparaging others, not disparaging ourselves by comparison with others, but simply being ourselves, able in God's sight to see ourselves for once as we truly are - only then do we know what it means to be loved and valued by God, and to find our identity and our self-worth in the only way that really counts in the end, as given to us by God who made us and redeems us. Before God those who despise

themselves can know that, even if they were the only sinner in the world, God's Son would still have gone to the cross for them alone. Before God those who pride themselves on being better than others can know that God's Son had to go to the cross for them just as much as for the others they despise.

This is how God brings down the haughty and lifts up the lowly, as Jesus puts it in that characteristic aphorism that sums it all up for us in memorable form: All who are high will be brought low, and all who are low will be lifted up. This is God's great reversal of status, whose purpose is to ensure that none can claim privilege or status above others.

So God's forgiveness - what the Pharisee cannot receive and the tax-collector does - is something so much more than just what happens when we say 'Sorry' to God for this or that. It's about being able - or being enabled by God to acknowledge to God who we really are, without pretending, without illusion, especially without comparing ourselves with others. It's the only way of really encountering God. Does that mean, then, knowing God and *ignoring* other people? Not at all. God's forgiveness, knowing ourselves to be forgiven sinners, frees us from the things that spoil our relations with each other. It frees us from the need to prove anything. It frees us from envy and one-up-manship. It frees us from the craving for approval and praise. It liberates us to value each other the way we value ourselves, to love our neighbour as ourselves.

So God's forgiveness makes the church. It makes a community that is distinctive not in feeling superior to others, but in knowing the God who demands all and forgives all and values each immeasurably. God's forgiveness, because it puts our relationship with God right and our relationships with other people right, is the root of everything else that it means to be God's people the church.

I shall comment much more briefly on our reading from Joel and my second theme: God's Spirit makes the church. This is the passage Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost as the key to what was happening in the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. 'You will know,' says God, 'that I am present in Israel,' and goes on to speak of pouring out his Spirit on his people. The Spirit is God's presence in the midst of his people, not just in individuals but between and among us as the community of God's people. If God's forgiveness is what puts us right with God and with others, puts our relationships on the right footing, God's Spirit is God's presence among us forgiven sinners. Just as God's forgiveness undermines all our attempts to feel superior to others, so God's Spirit ensures that no-one has privileged access to God - or, rather, the Spirit ensures that all have privileged access to God. Joel says that God will pour out his Spirit on men and women, old and young, even the slaves. Perhaps *especially* the slaves, because the Spirit, like forgiveness, turns the way we value people upside down. The Spirit too exalts the lowly and brings down the proud. More than that, the Spirit gives everyone their own place in the church's life and task. As Paul says, not all are prophets, not all are teachers, not all are musicians, not all visit the sick, not all open their homes to others - but all make their own contribution in the Spirit, none should be undervalued by the others. Being the church is partly about encouraging each other's gifts, letting the Spirit draw out the fullness of what is possible when all of us contribute the various gifts he gives to each of us differently. There is no room for superiority in God's sight, but there is ample room for complementarity and reciprocity in the Spirit, who orchestrates the diversity of his gifts into a whole that is

very much bigger than the sum of its parts. That's what the church is. It is the more, the very-much-more than we think is possible, the so-much-more that the Spirit can make out of a bunch of forgiven sinners like us.