

Sunday 26 October 2025
The Last Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Ecclesiasticus 35:12-17

NT: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Gp: Luke 18:9-14

A recent piece in the Telegraph by Tim Stanley on the current difficulties facing Prince Andrew, noted that:

“we don’t know how to handle Andrew because we don’t understand sin...Today, nobody goes to church, so we’ve become very unforgiving, yet the state also has a mixed record on punishment, so we don’t see the justice we crave...In place of retribution, which we’ve decided is cruel, we isolate and ostracise the accused, known in modern parlance as “cancelation”. Thus, Andrew will be condemned to a strange half-life where he’s never truly had to confront what he may or may not have done, yet millions will assume he’s guilty and treat him like a leper.” (Telegraph, 19 October).

These are powerful points that make us ask again what we mean by ‘sin’ and ponder the implication for the wider society. Our gospel reading today is often used to suggest how the Church moves from one group to another and proves itself adaptable for new people who are thought to be outsiders. The Church is to be a welcoming place for the stranger, and the unfamiliar and not take the attitude of the Pharisee. This is not a bad thought, but I have a suspicion that there is something rather deeper and more central about the faith than that.

The story of the pharisee and the tax collector is not simply a story between one very good and one very bad. But it’s more about a great crisis over what faith really is and what salvation really is. The Pharisee is someone who thinks that keeping the law to the letter allows him to know what his record is. He knows that he has the signs that make him acceptable to God. To which Paul and the Church ever since have replied: ‘There is no sign by which you can tell in and of yourself that you are acceptable to God. There is nothing about you that guarantees love, salvation, healing and peace’. Indeed, our first reading from Ecclesiasticus says: ‘Do not offer God a bribe’. Ecclesiasticus is clear that God is impartial in justice. Throughout the narrative of the Old Testament, that is the theme, and then it narrows and focuses on the extraordinary story of a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who has the insane courage and confidence to say I am inviting you in the name of God.

So, if you want to know where your certainty lies, look to God, not to yourself. There is everything about God that assures us. That is the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector, one looked to himself, and the other looked to his reality and said: ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner!’. So, perhaps we have a definition for sin here: it isn’t some sort of a high drama Satanic defiance, shaking our fists at the lightning. It isn’t even exciting

naughtiness'. It's just the condition of being seriously wrong about reality and living against the grain. Sin, therefore, is bound to be in the long run deeply frustrating and very boring indeed. And this is not just a description of sin that sits well with Tim Stanley's analysis of the character of Prince Andrew – Stanley obviously is a committed Christian royalist himself. But it's a good description of us. Sinners, well, for one thing, there are lots of us around....

So when we come to this altar, we come to God empty-handed looking into the face of God in Christ's presence in the sacrament, depending absolutely on him. That is what the gospel is about. There will be the strict among us who will make comments about why this or that is done without following the strict rules. But Jesus comes among us to say: 'If you don't need me, feel free to go'. Those who are well have no need for a physician, we read a few Sundays ago in Luke's gospel. If you are whole, at peace with yourself, satisfied in your skin, happy in your world, you don't need me'. And again, which of us will say, 'I am whole'. The gospel is difficult because it will not give comfort to the legalist, neither will it comfort the libertine. It does not say that you can win the grace of God by being good, or that the grace of God makes us different from others around. Rather, it makes us see reality; it sweeps away the veils, and allows us to look Jesus in the face when he asks us: 'Do you need me or not?' Are you hungry? Are you sick? If you are whole, then please go.

And here we are, we who have not found the nerve to walk away. And perhaps this is the best definition of what the Church is. We do not have the nerve to say I am totally healthy and in no need of you. We have not managed to lie that much, despite all the lies we tell ourselves day after day. We are here as hungry people gathered to eat together with the Lord as he sits at table with us, disreputable, unfinished, unhealthy, hungry sinners but at the end of the day, honest people, gathered with him to find renewal. While the body often has the capacity to heal itself, the soul it seems does not. The soul can only be loved into life; and love is something we cannot guarantee out of our own selves. We must come with hands and hearts open to receive it.

St Augustine of Hippo, in his *Confessions*, replied to his opponents who maintained that every sin was a fully conscious act of rebellion against God, by emphasising that most sins were committed by people weeping and groaning – people who knew better and felt trapped (including Augustine himself). It's one of the most realistic and compassionate insights in early Christian writing. You might remember Zacchaeus, that other tax collector who climbs the tree to see Jesus, hoping he won't be noticed. When Jesus stops and turns his face upwards to look at him, he doesn't say, 'You are a sinner, you need to change your ways'. He does not need to. He just invites himself to Zacchaeus' home and Zacchaeus at once says, 'I'll have to be different'. He is seeing for the first time an authentically human face, one that is not distorted by fear of God or other people. And that's all that is needed. So, every time, Zacchaeus, or you and I say, 'I am a sinner', we are reminding ourselves of the glimpse given through Jesus of the real world we'd never have dreamt of, left to ourselves. Interestingly, Paul spoke of himself in our second reading today as a 'good' sinner,

one who is aware of living in a bigger world than he can clearly see, but one that he longs for its appearing in the kingdom of God.

Those of us who care about the Church in this land and elsewhere, we do so not simply to keep an ecclesiastical institution upright, propping it up with more crumbling pillars. We care about it because we are part of the Body of Christ and this land would not have been what it has been without the Body of Christ. As we come to be fed with that love and that truth in the body and blood of the Lord, we pray for ourselves, Prince Andrew, and for this nation that we may never have the nerve to walk away and God will be merciful to us, sinners, as he has always promised.

Fr Yazid Said