

Bad Attitude
30th Sunday, Year C
Luke 18: 9-14
24 October 2010

When colleagues tell me that they have just returned from overseas having done a course on spiritual direction or spirituality my heart sinks. How can you teach others how to have an intimacy life with God as a tertiary qualification, I want to ask. And I want to go on to point out that you cant hothouse your relationship with God through an accelerated learning programme. It takes time, and life experience, and a developing personal maturity before anyone is ready to be a spiritual guide to others. There is no substitute for time spent on your knees before you start spouting on to others about how to pray. And the clincher argument is the point that the recent Moderator of the Presbyterian Church made to me some years back – prayer is a relationship and not a set of techniques. And in that relationship all of us start from the same point of nakedness and uncertainty as we set out to try and pray each day. Whether we are a longstanding Christian leader or a new convert we are none of us rock sure about how to proceed in trying to get in touch with God – or at least that is the kind of attitude that we ought to share.

Still that doesn't stop quite a few from going high tech in their approach to God. There is the Meyers Briggs personality inventory that tells you your personality type, and the kind of prayer techniques that match your style of being. And there is the Enneagramm that diagnoses the compulsion type that drives you, and apparently you can read off from that about your preferred access points to God. All very interesting, but if you take it too far you fall

into a trap that Karl Barth warned us about some time ago.

Human beings have an inbuilt and almost irresistible tendency to manufacture their relationship with God in such a way that they feel they are in control of the process and can award themselves merit points as they achieve certain milestones along the way. In this way of operating our personal human concerns set the agenda in our walk with God, and God must accommodate himself to whatever is uppermost in our wanting, desiring and fearing. And people get to feel very proud of their achievements on their path to union with God.

But this of course is a form of idolatry. And it is the very reverse of the rhythm and dynamic of the way the Bible portrays our life with God. He takes the initiative, he sets the tone, we love him because he first loved us, and he chose us before we chose him.

Some of this came home to me during my time in Auckland. In church after church I went to on Sunday the preaching focussed on application and practicality. The constant sub-text was how Christianity can help you to be a more successful, coping, and competent jaffa. One heard little of the radical notion that we come to church to be inspired, illumined and transformed as we are taken out of our normal range of concerns, and are transported into the strange and wonderful world of the New Testament where so much is different, and where our normal definition of what is success and fulfilment is stood on its head.

As Papanui Rd turns into Bealey Avenue there is a café in the block of shops at the road junction with a large painted portrait of the owner on the outside wall, a somewhat Junoesque woman, together with

the slogan, "It's all about me." The words could apply with equal force to the Pharisee we heard about this morning. Apparently he has moved well beyond life with God 101. What is more it is not just that his prayer technique is good, but he also does a bunch of stuff that shows he has cottoned on to the point that religion also involves ethical striving, and generous support of the community of faith. Here is a personal portrait that shows us, if we needed reminding, how much Jesus detested religious people who were sure of themselves, and self-righteous to boot.

The penitent tax collector is someone who reminds us that God is always close to the broken hearted, and of course he is someone who takes nothing for granted about his access rights to God's favour and attention. We might note in passing that his prayer is very close to one of the most famous prayers in the Christian spiritual tradition, the Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner." Currently it is the staple of my own daily prayer.

There is a paradox here, and its one that we must navigate if we are to become deeply convinced Christians. If we are serious about loving God and coming to know him then we need to take up what is called the disciplined search for holiness. This involves the acquiring of good habits that encourage a sense of effective connection with God. Developing the habit of daily prayer at a time when we are at our most alert and receptive, reading the Bible regularly, making a daily examination of conscience so that we can make a searching and insightful confession to God, and so forth. There are those who argue that it is best to be completely spontaneous and just pray when you feel like it, but

I am unconvinced. If we are at the mercy of our feelings then we may just leave God out of any relationship building activities for long stretches of time. What starts as method and discipline comes to feel like helpful and rewarding anchors that remind us who we are as God's children.

But the ever-present danger with the disciplined search for holiness is the temptation to spiritual pride. We can list all the helpful routines and spiritual practices we have built into our lives and think – “What a good boy am I.” I sometimes think that times of spiritual dryness and psychic disequilibrium are arranged by God to upset this kind of tick the box complacency about how to relate to God. Indeed faith really becomes faith when what used to work doesn't work anymore, and we are left wondering what the heck is going on when we pray into a void.

Perhaps a certain wry humour and an ironic refusal to take ourselves too seriously can save us from getting too pompous about our spiritual situation. For the further we advance in the spiritual life the greater becomes the possibility of disappearing into our own sense of self-importance, or of becoming immensely pleased with ourselves. And the ability to deal with and to our own egoism is in fact one of the litmus tests of genuine spiritual progress.

So in summary this morning we heard about the kind of bad attitude that will poison our prayer life and can ruin our life with God. And we have heard tell of the kind of good attitude that will provide a road back to God no matter how far we have fallen from grace and a life pleasing to God.

