

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 30C

6 Years ago I went on the trip of a lifetime around the Mediterranean. One of the stops on my trip was the country of Egypt. While I was there absorbing all the history I was reminded once again of the extraordinary beliefs the Ancient Egyptians held about the afterlife. When one died the soul would be judged on their behaviour during their lifetime before they could be granted a place in the Afterlife. This judgement ceremony was called "Weighing of the Heart" and was recorded in Chapter 125 of the funeral text known as the "Book of the Dead".

The ceremony was believed to have taken place before Osiris, the chief god of the dead and Afterlife, and a tribunal of 43 deities. Standing before the tribunal the deceased was asked to name each of the divine judges and swear that he or she had not committed any offences, ranging from raising the voice to stealing. This was the "negative confession". If found innocent, the deceased was declared "true of voice" and allowed to proceed into the Afterlife.

The symbolism that accompanied this ritual was the weighing of the heart of the deceased on a pair of enormous scales. It was weighed against the principle of truth and justice (known as maat) represented by a feather, the symbol of the goddess of truth, order and justice. If the heart balanced against the feather then the deceased would be granted a place in the Fields of Hetep and Iaru. If it was heavy with the weight of wrongdoings, the balance would sink and the heart would be grabbed and devoured by a terrifying beast that sat ready and waiting by the scales. This beast was Ammit, "the gobbler", a composite animal with the head of a crocodile, the front legs and body of lion or leopard, and the back legs of a hippopotamus. Rather frightening stuff.

Now these ideas of the divine and heaven may seem completely foreign to us, even ludicrous. But I am constantly surprised at the number of

people I meet who still think in this way about ones relationship with the God of the Holy Trinity. We actually reveal what our own thoughts are sometimes when we use phrases such as “I don’t think I’ll have much chance of getting to heaven.” Or even in something as simple as “well, I’ve done my good deed for the day.” There’s often the implication that our good deeds are going to win us favour, the favour of others, if not the favour of God. One still hears it said, and some people firmly believe, that we get into heaven by the good deeds we have done. They imagine God’s favour is obtained by these good deeds, and God’s anger aroused by our bad deeds.

If we imagine that our good deeds are going to win God’s favour and a place in heaven, then this morning’s parable is going to be a very difficult one for us to accept. In this story we have a Pharisee who was so obviously a good man. Look at all the good deeds he had done; he fasted twice a week, he paid tithes, said his prayers; he was not unjust, grasping, or adulterous, like the rest of the people around him. He kept the law of

God. He was clearly an honorable and virtuous man.

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The tax collector on the other hand was known to be bad. He belonged to a despised group with a poor reputation. Obviously he was seen as a sinner and a notorious one at that. He was one who disobeyed God.

But the story tells us the Pharisee displeased God and that the tax collector was pleasing to God. What’s gone wrong? Clearly it was not their outward behaviour which earned them God’s pleasure or displeasure. The good deeds of the Pharisee failed to win God’s favour, just as our good deeds cannot be used in the hope of winning such a reward.

How then can we win God’s favour? How can we be sure we please God? What do we have to do to get into heaven?

This well known parable reminds us again that we do not have to *win* God’s favour. We have it

already. As Paul reminds us, “God showed his love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” God has shown favour towards us in the life death and resurrection of Jesus. Because of what God has done in Jesus we no longer need to win the favour of God. That is ours. What we do need to do is to show we accept that goodness of God. We make it our own by acknowledging what God has done for us. *Win* God’s favour? That we cannot do.

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However we can show God we are thankful for his favour towards us, and so that is our joy.

The more we contemplate this gift God has given us, the more thankful we can be. The more too we will realize how we do not show our thanks enough. The Pharisee in the parable was unable to say thank you. He couldn’t see anything except his own good deeds. Keeping his eyes fixed on those deeds, he made sure God knew about them. He was also sure these deeds made him better than anyone else. His entire attention was focused on himself.

On the other hand, the tax collector knew where he stood in relation to God. His attention was focused on God and all he could do was ask for mercy for not living as he should. God answered his prayers because he was able to ask for something. The Pharisee asked for nothing and received nothing. The Tax Collector knew what he needed, asked for it and received.

There is no way we can win God’s favour and we do not need to. Nor can we win for ourselves a place in heaven. Despite how we may feel at times about our own misgivings, there is no scale to measure our deeds, and thankfully there is no beast to consume the unrighteous. For the scriptures tell us that God has prepared a place for us. The favour of God is already shown to us. These are God’s gifts and we show our thankfulness by worship, loving others, and being generous to God, his church and his people.