

Joel 2 v23-33 Psalm 65 v1-13

Luke 18 v9-14

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be always acceptable in your sight O Lord.

The topic for this sermon was selected long before I went on holiday at the end of August, but I had been away less than 48 hours when I knew I had to talk about my holiday as part of the sermon and yes I am going to show you some holiday pictures. I know that this is not the traditional way to start a sermon, but in my mind it all links beautifully with the Gospel reading.

Our holiday started in Paris, then Venice, then New York and Egypt and Camelot...no we didn't tour all these places they are some of the hotels on the strip in Las Vegas.

Las Vegas is a town built in a dust bowl that is surrounded by mountains. It is a city that does not sleep; the roads are busier at 4am than they are at 10am. The centre of the town is all hotels, each one trying to have a better attraction than its neighbours; one even has a waterfall that becomes a volcano at certain times in the evening. There are shopping malls that are totally enclosed and during an hour the light levels change as they range from sunrise to sunset; the shops are all designer brands and the prices match the names!



You walk from one hotel to the next looking at the displays and art work...one hotel had an area that was as large as the footprint of our church that was an underwater garden at the start of our holiday and when we returned after 2 weeks they were just completing their Fall display. A full time team works on these every day, changing in

fresh flowers. I haven't mentioned the casinos which are carefully placed so that you have to walk through them to get to anywhere in the hotel, even from reception to the lifts (we did only pass through these areas, and interestingly although the rest of the indoor areas where smoke free zones the casinos were not).

Las Vegas is an eye opener, it is fun but it is soulless. It is all for the generation of money. Amongst all these exciting hotels there was no church (I expect they are in the surrounding areas/suburbs where the thousands of workers live). It is a great creator of employment, user of electricity and water (it is in a desert area with little rainfall) and a huge tourist attraction but for me it was all gloss with no substance.

After 2 days we moved on to tour some of the natural sights of the area. In 17 days we drove 2,500 miles and saw some of the most amazing scenery. My vocabulary is not good enough to convey the awesome rock formations that we saw. So often we just stood, gaped and said 'wow'. The words 'Oh Lord my God when I in awesome wonder survey the works thy hand has made' were constantly running through my head and sometimes I burst into song with them. Bryce Canyon with its hoodoos (we would call them stacks, but hoodoo is a more evocative word); Cedar Breaks with its large amphitheatre; Zion with its imposing rock faces and of course the Grand Canyon, which we saw from the North Rim first and later from the South Rim, where most visitors go.

It is so deep that if Ben Nevis was dropped in it would not reach the top! It is 10 miles across from the North to the South Rim and a mile deep. Our photographs do not do the scenery justice

These sights defy description, they are truly magnificent, they take your breath away; they support wildlife and have been left

in their natural state with little interference from people. They are a testament to God's glory. They are just there, as they have been for millions of years; part of the environment that has developed over such a long time with nature running her course. It



is scenery designed to teach people humility; surrounded by such lofty grandeur we are so small.

So how does this fit with the Gospel reading which is a parable that Jesus told about 2 men who have gone to pray and ask for forgiveness.

The first man is a Pharisee. Pharisees were a group of Jews who were noted for their very strict observance of the laws of Moses, both the written and oral tradition. The one who Jesus uses in his story is very sure of himself and knows that he has kept all the rules including fasting twice a week, and paying tithes on all he receives. He stands tall as, in his mind, he has done what he should have. He then goes on to list the sins of other people...greed, dishonesty and adulterous behaviour. He is grateful that he is not like the tax gatherer. Tax gatherers were particularly unpopular people; you might ask what is new? In Jesus' time they were employed by the Romans to collect taxes for Rome, which was resented by the Jewish people, in fact they regarded them as traitors as they were working for the enemy. The resentment was increased as Rome did not pay tax collectors, the tax collectors had to put an extra levy on the taxes they collected to have an income; some tax collectors were quite greedy for themselves.

However the tax collector in Jesus' story has a very different approach to his prayer. He is full of shame; he beats his chest and bows his head and does not approach the altar. He doesn't boast in his prayer but asks for God's mercy as he knows that he is a sinner.

Jesus says that it is the tax collector who is forgiven by God. God sees through all the trappings of life and knows who is genuine in what they believe and how they act in their daily life. God's forgiveness is there for those who are honest with themselves and sorry before Him when they have done wrong.

For me Las Vegas represents the Pharisee. On the outside it looks good and is fun and exciting to walk around seeing a whole variety of sights and shows, but at the heart of its operations are money making and that is largely through gambling. It boasts about what it has but does not look out for people. Its veneer is only skin deep. Like the Pharisee it has no humility and is arrogant.

On the other hand the humility of the tax collector is reflected on people in the awesome sight of the canyons and rock formations. Everyone is overawed by them. You can draw yourself up to your full height but you are still so small in this context and

humble before God. Our God, even though we are small, knows us personally and even when we have done wrong, He will surround us with his love and mercy when we approach Him in prayer with humility and honesty. Like the tax collector we can receive his mercy.

Let us pray

Lord help us to remember who we are and how our lives affect others; help us not to be proud and boastful about what we have done but to be humble before you that we might know your mercy and bring your grace to others. Amen