

But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain

St Paul distils for us the message of the parable and the goal of the journey on which the Gospel set us.¹

by the grace of God I am what I am:

St Paul's brief recitation of the Gospel which he has received is a description of the grace of God manifest in the life of the Lord Jesus. St Paul describes, first, not what he has accomplished, but what the Lord Jesus has done for him and for us. St Paul invites us to fix our gaze on this same grace, to fix our gaze on the Lord Jesus. That is also a description of our worship today, we are invited to fix our gaze on the Lord Jesus, and in seeking him, to become more able to say-- By the grace of God I am what I am.

This is also an invitation to adoration, it is the path to peace. To say with St Paul 'by the grace of God I am what I am' is to know the things which belong to our peace. The journey to this peace is both arduous and confusing. 'By the grace of God I am what I am', is not a truth which we can grasp for ourselves. It is the goal of a journey, a fruit which grows in us. It is a disorienting journey. The fruit comes with pruning which is painful.²

The Pharisee gives us a warning. The things he describes are good – he is serious enough about prayer to fast, he gives away 10% of everything he possesses. But he is not seeing God's goodness, God's mercy, God's generosity, He sees reflections of God's goodness in himself, and he mixes this reflection up for the real thing.

Gregory the Great compares the Pharisee to the Maccabean hero Eleazar. Eleazar was one of the faithful Jews who joined the rebellion against the Greek-speaking rulers who made Judaism illegal in the middle of the 2nd century B.C.. Eleazar must have been a brave man. The Greek- Syrian army included a section of elephants, the heavy armour of the day. Eleazar crawled under one of these elephants and thrust his spear up into the elephant's belly. 'Whereupon the elephant fell down upon him, and there he died.' (1 Macc. 6.46) This passage may have inspired Tolkien and the battle where the elephants picture the overwhelming force of the diabolical powers opposed to the Fellowship of the Ring.³

¹ One man thanks God for his gifts, he hardly speaks to God at all, he is talking with himself. He has real gifts, it is good that he knows about fasting, and sacrificial giving. But the way he holds this gifts corrupts and perverts them. The other man has a profound sense of his need for mercy. This man knows that his life is out of order, and knowing this, he cries out to God.

² The orthodox theologian Olivier Clément describes this journey when he praises a certain kind of atheism: 'Perhaps contemporary atheism, to the extent that it is not stupidity, but a purifying revolt, could be understood in a new way as the path of 'unknowing' that is not an intellectual path but is pure adoration'.

Perhaps contemporary atheism ... could be a purifying revolt ... a new way as the path of 'unknowing', but ... pure adoration'. (Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 30)

On the one hand, Dionysius affirms that because God 'in himself contains the beginning of all creatures he can be honoured and named in terms of every creature'. (Divine Names, I.1,6 (PG 3,596) in Clement, p 29). Both a puny worm and the bright sun can speak to us of the Lord Jesus. On the other hand, all these things hide or conceal God. If we think we have God all figured out, at best we are seeing something of God in 'those knowable things that owe their being to God'. At worst, we are creating an idol, a false God. Clément thinks these false views of God, these idols, can be destroyed by some forms of atheism. Atheism, says Clément, is sometimes not so much a rejection of God, but a rejection of false views of God which we have produced by mistake. Oh dear, could we be doing it now? How do we avoid making such idols?

³ St Gregory the Great, (540 -604) great 6th century bishop of Rome, in his book on Job, compares the Pharisee in the parable to a character in the first book of Maccabees. The first book Maccabees tells the story of the Jews who in the 2nd century B.C. revolted against the Greek King of Syria. Here the enemy of Israel was not primarily the Roman empire, but the remains of Alexander the Great's Greek empire. The King, [Antiochus Epiphanes, d. 164 BC] attacked Jerusalem in 169 BC and desecrated the temple. He tried to outlaw essential elements of Judaism and substitute a form of Greek paganism in its place. [outlawed both Sabbath-keeping and circumcision].

Greg compares Eleazar to Pharisee. Why? well, the Pharisee had won great victories also. His justice and fairness and his commitment to basic disciplines of religious life show that he has won significant spiritual victories. There is a kind of bravery and even fearlessness in the victories of the spiritual life. Eleazar was a brave man, who saw danger and met it head on. But, his success was the cause of his demise. Greg. Great writes:

‘Thus Eleazar in the battle smote and brought down an elephant, but fell under the very beast that he killed. Whom, then, does this one represent, ... but those persons who overcome bad habits, but by being lifted up are brought down under the very things they bring under? For it is as if he died under the enemy he lays low, who is lifted up by the sin that he subdues.’

‘For it is as if he died under the enemy he lays low, who is lifted up by the sin that he subdues.’ The Pharisee is a warning of the dangers that come along with victories in the spiritual life. His sight has stopped short of God, and it is fixed on himself. He is missing the very thing that prayer and almsgiving are supposed to show to him. This is a terrifying story.

We look to the Pharisee not the way he looks at the Publican, but we look to him in love – we see ourselves, we see one like ourself, with similar weaknesses. When we speak of him, we speak of ourselves. If he saw the divine Goodness more clearly, he would not praise himself. If he saw more of this divine goodness, beauty and love, the Pharisee would be moved to adoration. In the parable, his gratitude is a talking with himself, a looking in at himself, a being content with a reflection. In all this, he turns his back on the real thing. If he saw the real thing, his heart would be enlarged, he would give thanks, but he would not be content with himself in a self-satisfied way. He could be both grateful, and aware of the source and goal of the goodness he sees. The Pharisee has put himself in the place where God is, and this is what pride always does—in some way we put ourselves where God belongs. In showing us all of this, the Pharisee invites us to cultivate a discipline of thanksgiving, the Pharisee invites us to humble adoration of a divine goodness the surpasses our imaginations and our hopes.

The Pharisee shows us one kind of danger, but so also does the Publican. Our Lord does not praise a kind of vision which makes the Pharisees error in reverse, the kind of vision which makes such a mountain of our sins or faults, that it blocks our view of God. If our awareness of sin blocks our view of the divine light, this also is a dangerous self-obsession. Seeing our faults is not the goal of the Christian life.

The Russian Orthodox bishop and writer, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, offers a helpful story to take us from the blindness of the Pharisee to the kind of vision which is praised in the Publican. Bp Anthony Bloom describes a young woman who came to him:

She sat with the most miserable expression on her face and said, “Fr. Anthony, I perish through vanity.” And I said, “How do you do that?” “Whenever I look into the mirror, I find that I am lovely to look at. What can I do?” [she said]

[Bp Anthony replies] “I’ll tell you what you do. You take your stand before the mirror and you detail all the features of your face and whenever you see that something is lovely, you say, ‘How lovely it is, how wonderful that God has made me so beautiful!’ And when you have discovered that your face the whole of it is just loveliness, you thank God for it and then you turn to Him in repentance for one thing, because all the loveliness is of God, and the sour expression, which you have now on your face, is the only contribution you have made to it.”

Bp Anthony makes the point that a smart person does not honour God by insisting that he is stupid, or a capable person does not honour God by insisting that she is not able to do anything well. But in both cases, what really grabs the attention of the person who can see clearly is the all-surpassing

goodness and beauty of God. We may see our gifts, but know them to be reflections, and even as we give thanks, we know that what we have is a small measure of what God has in store for us.

If the Pharisee in the parable could see clearly, he might still give thanks that God had given him grace to pray and to give. At the same time, his awareness of the divine Goodness and mercy would have shown him that he was much closer to the Publican than to God. Seeing from within the divine love, he would receive the gifts of grace with gratitude, not a reason for self-congratulation, but as a reason to give thanks. The Pharisee might still hope for the Publican to change, but his prayer would come from love and a sense of communion with the Publican. He would be with the Publican as one in need to grace and mercy.

Bp Anthony helps us to see the what our Lord praises in the Publican. The Publican knows that his life is out of order. He makes a living by taking more taxes than what is fair and just from the people in his charge. 'Publican' in the NT is practically another word for dishonesty. However, we don't know exactly what is on the mind of this particular person. But we do know that the Publican in the parable sees enough of the divine Goodness to know that his life is out of order. The sins for which he asks mercy are the shadows cast by the divine light. He knows that God's goodness is sufficient for him, more than enough. What is praised in the publican is not a kind of grovelling which would be a rejection of his human dignity. We could say that in seeing more of the divine Goodness, he sees what he is made for. He knows that he is a son of God and is meant to live like a son of the great king, and instead he is living in squalor. Like the Prodigal Son, he has left the palace and made his home in the a pigsty. That's what the sins we chose look like.

One of the best descriptions of the gift which the Publican shows to us comes from John Climacus:
"Repentance is the daughter of hope and the denial of despair. [Ladder 5]" It is not despondency but eager expectation; it is not to feel that one has reached an impasse, but to take the way out. It is not self-hatred but the affirmation of my true self as made in God's image.

To repent is to look, not downward at my own shortcomings, but upward at God's love; not backward with self-reproach, but forward with trustfulness. It is to see, not what I have failed to be, but what by the grace of Christ I can yet become.⁴

This is what the Publican points us to. We are invited to look 'not backward with self-reproach, but forward with trustfulness'. We are being called to see not what we have failed to be, but what by the grace of Christ we can yet become.

But this seeing is painful, it is a journey toward a destination where we have not yet arrived. To see more of God's goodness, we need to be willing to have false images or poor reflections of this goodness and love destroyed or put to death. There is a kind of disorientation as well as a delight and satisfaction that comes with seeing what by the grace of Christ we can yet become. St Paul's three days of blindness after he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus is a picture of the experience which is part of the Christian life, in the same way that we are always learning, we never leave behind the need to un-know, to have the false pictures destroyed. We have encountered the Risen Lord, we have seen him already, and yet, every year we come back to this parable which warns us, it warns us that we have not yet seen all that we must see. In the simple confession of faith which St Paul makes in the epistle, in the filled-out version of this confession which we will make together in the Nicene creed in a few moments, there is a treasure which we have only begun to discover. Finding this treasure will mean coming to recognize when we talking with ourselves rather than God, going to see when we are content with an idol, with a tiny sliver or reflection of divine goodness rather than the real thing. The woman Bp Anthony describes, and the Pharisee in the parable, offer different sorts of warnings.

⁴ "The Orthodox Experience of Repentance," Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, SVP, New York, 2001

Today, we come as those who have seen enough to know that we still wish to see Jesus, we come as those who look not backward with reproach, but upward to God's love. In that looking, we will see the sins which are the shadows cast by the divine light. We will repent. But this repentance is not despair, but an expression of hope, to see, what by the grace of Christ we can yet become. And because we know that this seeing not a gift of intellect alone, we know that this grace is not something we can give ourselves, we cry out with the Publican, Lord have mercy, and mercy comes to us. Mercy comes to be our food and drink. Mercy speaks to us in the Gospel, Mercy feeds us in the sacrament of the altar. May the divine goodness and mercy in our Risen Lord Jesus restore us to ourselves and raise us up in Him and with Him. Thanks be to God.