Sermon on Luke 18:9-14

So, something; let’s practice a bit of visualization. This, I hope, will help you grasp the message of the Gospel message in front of us today.

If it helps you to close your eyes in order to see with your mind’s eye please do; I won’t be offended because I know you’re not sleeping!

Now, if you please, picture two people coming into St. Thomas/St. Matthew to pray. The first person to enter and kneel at the altar rail is someone you revere as a spiritual leader, perhaps a priest or pastor or parent or friend who was deeply influential on your spiritual journey.

Try to bring to mind someone who has or had a reputation for caring for those around; a person compassionate to the hurting, yet willing to speak truth to you when you needed to hear it; a person who led a lifestyle that exhibited a journey of faith and that was or is deeply attractive to you.

For me, I’m picturing Archbishop Thomas Morgan, a person filled with the Holy Spirit, a person committed to walking with me on the path of ordination.

Now, notice that as this person who you revere is praying another person wanders in; he’s is one of the town scoundrels, someone who has stolen in his business dealings, someone who has damaged the reputation of many good people, he has even slurred the reputation of this parish for good measure.

The person in your mind’s eye isn’t of course going to judge this scoundrel, that’s not what she or he would do. Indeed we notice that this “scoundrel” is in some distress, we notice that he is sniffling and now sobbing openly.

After assessing the situation, the person we revere decides that it would be appropriate to help in this spiritual crisis. Moving towards the person it’s as if his own life flashes before his eyes: all the key decisions that he has made, some mistakes too, but mostly the decisions to embrace the path that has led him to become what he is: a trusted spiritual leader.

In that moment he is deeply grateful that he hasn’t made the same choices as this town scoundrel; that he’d had the sense to see clearly the implications of what his faith asked of him in terms of practice and ethics, what Anglicans call “a rule of life.”

As he moves towards the man he hears him sob, “God have mercy, mercy, please God, please!”

I wanted you to visualize our gospel reading from a different angle so that you might hear it outside of Luke’s editorial comments which may colour our understanding of Jesus’ message.

If we strip away Luke’s comments we get something remarkably similar to what we just visualized: a respected religious leader or spiritual person whose actions and gratefulness are fully to be expected and admired, actually.

The shock value for us comes when we recognize that there’s not actually a lot at the core of this story to criticize! We’ve been conditioned to think of the Pharisee as a pompous, arrogant man who needs to be humbled.

But notice that Jesus does not, in the first place, criticize the content of the Pharisee’s prayer in terms of what is thankful for avoiding: it is right and good to have the thought: “thank-you that I’ve not taken a path that has led to ruin; at least so far!”

We remember to our benefit that the Bible as a whole, that God speaking through these stories, commends to us, in the most vigorous terms, a rule of life that rejects the way of thievery, being a rogue, a drunk, an adulterer and extorting gain illegally as would have been the case for tax collectors working for Rome.

Secondly, Jesus does not criticize the Pharisee’s practices of fasting, his self-discipline. Without self-discipline we cannot come anywhere near fulfilling our potential!

Neither does Jesus criticize his practice of tithing: stewardship of all that God gives us is central to the biblical vision and is crucial to participating in the life of health community that is at the heart of the good life.

Indeed, the psalms which we are encouraged to pray every day are full of the types of prayers that the Pharisee uses both in terms of thankfulness for what God helps us to do and what God helps us to avoid.

So what’s the problem; why would Jesus tell this story? And why would Luke add the comments that he does?

Two words point the way: as Luke comments, Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were *righteous*.” We were looking at this incredibly important word last week and we noticed that the inspiration of scripture is precisely that we might be trained in righteousness.

The word also features in our second reading in reference to God’s character and the type of reward we hope to gain, “a crown of righteousness.”

The other word is “Justify,” “this man went down to his home justified rather than the other.”

Years ago I was teaching a group of fourth year college students a seminar called “the Bible and Social Justice.” It was a fabulous class filled with motivated students and we took our learning out into the hallways of the campus raising money for fistula operations for women in Ethiopia and educating folks on the importance of water policy.

One of the key moments in the class came early on when we examined the words “righteousness” and “justice” and found that they come from the same Greek root.

This insight immediately helps us understand that to be a “righteous person” is not a description of someone who thinks of themselves as better than someone else but is related to being a “just person.”

Indeed it is the way that Luke tells the story that may be at the root of our misunderstanding. Jesus is basically drawing our attention to what we might call a category error.

If the man was righteous he would not have made the comparison that he did; for to be righteous is to be like God! God’s is righteous in that he enacts justice; that is God seeks to put the world to rights working by the force of God’s Love.

God’s justice is the flip side: it is our experience of being put right, in other words, as Jesus says of the scoundrel, being justified. We remember the famous verse from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans where he says that “God is faithful and *just* to forgive us all our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

God’s justice doesn’t condemn us but, rather fixes what is broken; it resets our broken souls that now you and I can participate in God’s putting of the world to rights, that is so that you and I can live righteously.

In other words, you can’t be acting righteously and having contempt for a person at the same time! Ouch, this is starting to hit rather close to home!

So to go back to the core of our story and to our visualization of it: you can indeed be thankful for a life well lived but the very definition of a righteous life is to admit that *God* has justified you and you are now experiencing the fruit of God’s “setting you to rights.”

Experiencing God’s justice, strange as it is to say, is to experience God’s mercy and forgiveness and find ourselves put right; Hallelujah!

The Gospel nugget here is the gift of recognition: recognizing the blessings of decisions that have turned out well as well as the need for mercy and forgiveness.

The story, as it stands, is not against a healthy self-confidence but asks us to, first, celebrate God’s righteous will to justify us all.

That is the humility that helps us experience light and life.

Rejecting comparisons and staying engaged with our neighbours; not withdrawing in smug self-satisfaction but using our spiritual practices to help us open up to more of God, more of others and more challenges, these are the genuine tests of righteous living.

Living for ourselves can never be righteous, will end up making a scoundrel of us, but at this table we meet our Lord and Saviour who, aware of who he was in deep gratefulness, because of that awareness, gave himself to us, offered us the same life that he experiences with the Father so all of us, so that the whole world might be “put right.”

Witnessing this love, this supreme gift, our hearts cry “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Amen.