

Sermon - October 27th 2019
Joel 2: 23-32 Luke 18:9-14
Rev Hugh Perry

Do we accept our common humanity? Do we believe we reflect God's love by loving and accepting ourselves and others? Do we expect God to pour out the divine spirit on all flesh, as Joel suggests, or do we judge others, by our feelings of self-righteousness like the pharisee in Jesus' parable?

Certainly, it's hard to be loving and accepting when the inland revenue puts your phone call on hold. Furthermore, the image of the call centre woman putting people on hold while she finishes her snack box just makes it worse, and, like the people of Jesus' time, we often have issues with tax.

In the recent local body elections, a number of candidates campaigned on zero or restricted rate increases. That is quite a challenge in an under-insured city so recently rocked by a whole series of devastating earthquakes.

But most people are rational and when I was door knocking with now ECan councillor Jenny Hughey rates were certainly mentioned but by far the most issues raised were clean water and council services. Most people would seem to agree with Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr who said "I like to pay taxes. With them, I buy civilization".

Holmes was an associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States from 1902 to 1932 and was later re-quoted and slightly reworded in a 1936 address by Franklin D. Roosevelt. 'Mr. Justice Oliver Wendell once said: 'Taxes are the price we pay for civilized society.'

However, things were different in first century Palestine as the Pharisees in our Gospel makes clear. In fact, even the tax-collector in the story regarded himself as a sinner and we can assume that Jesus' audience would agree with him.

There was a widespread distaste of Roman taxes and those who collected the tax even though the Roman Empire is certainly regarded by history as civilised. After all Rome could easily justify the taxes it collected by the amenities and lasting peace it provided.

But Rome collected the bulk of its tax from the least able to pay, which is a system that is not unheard of in our world. Furthermore, although roads and water reticulation are a common good, palaces and sports stadiums are not always viewed as a priority by those asked to pay for them.

I could well imagine that a network of roads spread across the empire was a great advantage to the Romans but most of their subject people probably thought it would be more cost effective if their oppressors just stayed in Rome.

The other issue was that the tax-collectors mentioned in the Bible were local people employed by Rome and therefore regarded as collaborators and traitors. Collaborators are regarded as major sinners in any culture. They are the first to be sent for vigorous re-education after any revolution.

My understanding is that in the Roman world a small flat tax was paid by every household. Flat taxes, like GST are always a bigger imposition on the poor than the wealthy. But most of the tax was tolls on the transport of goods. Therefore, peasant farmers and Galilean fishermen could not get their fish and produce to market without paying the toll. In the great enthusiasm for user pays and privatisation some new motorways are built by contractors who are paid by the road users through tolls that continue to be collected by the contractor long after the road has been paid for. Of course, in this computer age we don't need toll collectors because cameras recognise car number plates and debit the owners account every time they use a new motorway.

Tax collecting in Roman times was also privatised with would be tax collectors tendering by offering an amount they would pay the state and their payment for the service was whatever amount they were able to collect above that.

There are similar systems in emerging economies in our world. Kim Phuc is the napalm scarred 'girl in the picture' photographed by Vietnamese photographer Nick Ut. Years later when returning from their honeymoon in Russia Kim's husband was delayed at passport control. He would have missed the plane if a Russian speaking Cuban student hadn't intervened. The student later explained the official was trying to extract a bribe.¹

Kim herself was exploited as a propaganda tool by her government as they tried to pressure the USA into recognising the unified Vietnam. The continued interruptions in her life were detrimental to her health and education. Because we like happy endings, I need to tell you the exploitation ended in the airport lounge on a refuelling stopover from Moscow. Kim grabbed her new husband's passport and walked over to the official behind the glass window and received those words that have spelled new beginnings to hundreds of refugees. 'Welcome to Canada.'

So, reflecting on systems open to corruption that are thousands of years apart we can understand why the Pharisee felt so self-righteous, and most of Jesus' audience would have agreed with him.

But this is a Jesus parable and as usual expectations are reversed. The tax collector is redeemed for his contrition and the Pharisee is chastised for his self-righteousness.

The tax collector also needs understanding. First century Palestine was a feudal society which meant that those farming families that could retain their inherited right to farm a particular piece of land could feed their families even though a significant amount of their production went on rent. Likewise, a family with an inherited fishing boat could survive even though transporting and processing their catch would attract tolls. People who didn't have, or had lost an inherited business, were reduced to selling their labour on a day to day basis, begging or some form of crime. Furthermore, Roman justice had ways of dealing with debtors and with unwanted vagabonds such as slavery, gladiatorial spectacles and crucifixion.

So, we can't blame the tax collector or officials in emerging economies seeking bribes. Nor can we condemn people seeking refuge from such places. We certainly can't blame the tax collector in our story for acting in a way that gave security for him and his family. But such security would not always overcome the guilt of causing hardship to others or make them immune to the sort of derision they received from fellow Jews.

That loathing is expressed in the parable by the Pharisee and we can make some assumptions about his position in society. The Pharisees are referred to as a religious party that had a particular view about what it was to be a loyal religious Jew and, after the fall of the temple, it was their view that evolved into present day Judaism. Although historians tell us there was no middle class in the Roman Empire the Pharisees must have had a certain freedom from want to be involved in the activity of a religious party. In his letters Paul, who was a Pharisee, talks about working as a tent maker. So perhaps Pharisees had successful family businesses or inherited wealth that gave enough spare time for religious politics. That would also give the Pharisee reason to gloat. It would also be quite rational to give thanks for the fact that he was not in the situation where he was forced to take on a job that compromised his patriotism and political belief.

But the real question for us in this parable lies in what it says to us. We don't have pharisees in our society anymore. Instead we have talk show hosts and opinion writers who eloquently despise the disadvantaged on behalf of the comfortable.

We certainly have people who are trapped in poverty by family circumstances and even with our current low level of unemployment it can be difficult for people made redundant nearing retirement age to find new employment.

In politely avoiding examples in our own nation we can reflect that, in a united communist Vietnam, Kim Phuc had the advantage of accessible education.

However, the security offered by her mother's noodle shop was undermined, first by nationalising her shop, then by excessive taxation imposed by regional officials trying to better their own position and influence.

¹ Denise Chong, *The Girl in the Picture* (London 2001: Simon & Scribner) p.,349.

A situation not unlike the tax collector in Jesus' story. Furthermore, Kim's education was continually interrupted by government ordered propaganda trips designed to shame the United States into lifting the trade embargo. Finally, a scholarship to study in Cuba gave her some stability until the Cuban economy collapsed and immersed her in extreme poverty.

So, there is a lot that is relevant to our time and place in Jesus' parable and the promise of new beginnings from Joel. There is also relevance in the contrast and reversals of assumptions for the church and we can assume that Luke included this parable as much as a teaching for the church as well as individuals.

So, we not only have to ask what this parable says to us, we also need to ask ourselves if we are part of a church of the Pharisee or the tax collector.

I am sure we can all think of churches where following the rules is important. We have also observed people in some churches whose members are inclined to look at those outside the church and be thankful that they are not like them.

When such churches deal with readings like our passage from Joel they focus on the apocalyptic prose at the end of this morning's passage. That prose section affirms their belief that, as righteous Pharisees, they will be rewarded, and the tax collectors and other sinners will get what they deserve.

There is also a feeling among some churches that some occupations are callings and others are just jobs. As a much younger person I experienced the feeling among church folk that some occupations were more 'Christian' than others. Doctors and clergy were doing God's work but photographers like me needed to take on as much voluntary church work as possible to guarantee their salvation. But Nick Ut's photograph of Kim Phuc didn't just win a Pulitzer Prize, it stopped a war. Nick also saved Kim's life and gave the United Nations a peace ambassador and the church an evangelist.

When I was a JC we all affirmed that 'service to other was the best work of life' and we unthinkingly forgave the tax inspector in our midst because he was a good bloke. Furthermore, most of us would like to think that we belong to churches that don't criticize others. Churches that offer reconciliation and hope to people whose economic circumstances drag them into occupations that seem less than ideal. We can even work through the social and economic necessity of the Spirit calling some people to be tax inspectors. After all taxes are the price we pay for civilized society and we can't all be heart surgeons and missionaries.

But most churches contain a cross section of the sanctimonious and the sinners and acknowledge that we are all on a journey together.

More importantly the poetry section of the Joel reading stresses that our God is a God of new beginnings. Calamities like swarms of insects happen but the seeds of new beginnings are already in the ground. Rugby matches are cancelled because of a typhoon but the team that threatened legal action if their game was cancelled were beaten by the Brave Blossoms.

All of us can be both the sanctimonious Pharisees and depressed with our place in life. But all have the Christ seeds within us and all of us are called to new beginnings.

Both these readings recognise triumph and disaster in our lives and in our world and affirm the divine possibility of new growth and new beginnings.

As a church and as God's people we are called to nurture the seeds of renewal and offer new beginnings to ourselves and to our world.