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The Pharisees have really had bad press. To call someone a Pharisee is to suggest that they're stuck-up, sanctimonious, hypocritical, self-righteous and unable to bend. They think that they are always right.

This is the impression we get from reading the Gospels. Today's Gospel a case in point – the Pharisee seems to be hard and self-righteous, not someone we'd want to spend time with – whereas the tax collector, by his very confession of guilt, is the warm approachable character and the one that we'd like to be associated with – a character that provokes our empathy.

Elsewhere Jesus reserves some of his most vitriolic language for the Pharisees. He calls them 'white-washed sepulchres', 'hypocrites'

With the benefit of 2000 years of reading the Gospel story almost anyone, non-churchgoers included, will tell you that to call someone a Pharisee is to insult them.

Because of this we lose the real impact of the Gospel story. We tend to type cast the characters and we know what the story is about. We associate with the tax collector and we encourage ourselves to greater personal repentance and humility – or we may even allow ourselves to think we behave in the same humble, way. 'Lord, I thank you that I am not like this Pharisee,' we might pray!

If we really want to hear what Jesus was talking about, we need to try to understand how Pharisees and tax collectors were seen by the people to whom Jesus was speaking.

The Pharisees were part of a group in Israel called the 'Hasidaeans', which translates as 'God's loyal ones', a group that tried really hard to follow the teaching of the OT. The name Pharisee means 'the separated ones', because of their desire to follow the OT teaching as faithfully as they could. There was a period when they were the dominant political force in Israel, but by the time of Jesus, they had suffered persecution under Herod and had decided that spiritual ends could not be attained by political means.

They were a group who believed that Israel had gone into exile in OT times because it had failed to keep God's law, the Torah. They believed strongly in the unity and holiness of God and the absolute authority of the Torah. They stressed tithing, and had very high ethical standards.

When seen like this, Pharisees are not the unattractive people that we believe them to be. In fact we might even feel that it would be good if the Church was like them, maintaining high ethical standards in our society, giving at a level that means that God's work is not constrained by resources. Perhaps we have something to learn from the Pharisees, particularly when it comes to our own planned giving!

When it comes to tax collectors, we have a greater understanding. We still have a sense that the tax man takes from us what is rightfully ours. The feeling against tax collectors in Jesus' time was a bit stronger. They were the quislings, the people who aided and abetted the occupying power, often using their position for personal gain.

If this is what Pharisees were like, if this was how tax collectors were seen, what effect might Jesus' story have had on his listeners? It would have been difficult for Jesus to find more distinctly opposite characters. The Pharisee loyal to Israel, persecuted, by the Romans, faithful to the Torah versus the tax collector, the outcast of society.

It is unlikely that people would have seen the Pharisee's words in the story as presumptuous. Everything he said about himself was true. People would have believed that he was the one close to God. He was the faithful church attender of his day. He was the highest Sunday giver in the Church, he had great integrity in his business dealing, he didn't fiddle his tax and he was to be commended above anyone else as an example of a truly religious person. We might say, A 'good Christian!'

But Jesus makes it clear that the penitent tax collector is accepted by God when the faithful Pharisee is not. Just as Jesus warns the committed religious people of his day against complacency, so he challenges us, the faithful ones, the ones who go to church on a cold Sunday morning.

There's no room, Jesus says, for sitting on our laurels, believing that we have got life sorted, believing that there is no more we need to do. For if we do this, the shocking challenge of the Gospel is that we may well watch the drug addict, the prostitute, the alcoholic, the gambler, the thief, or even a modern day tax collector, show evidence of real repentance and be accepted by God when we are left out in the cold.

Amen.

