HOMILY FOR WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 18TH, 2026 / LUKE 18: 9 – 14

This is our first Evening Prayer of Lent, 2026. Lent is a season that asks us to be especially vigilant about our own behaviour, thoughts, and actions. It is a time for contemplation about the appropriate characteristics of a follower of Jesus, self-evaluation to discover where we fall short, and prayerful attempts to change. It is a season to reinvigorate our Christian practice and discipline. It has been a common practice to give up something for Lent – something that you will truly miss and long for. The thought is that the sense of longing will remind you to be disciplined in introspection. For some years now in parts of the church the emphasis has been less on giving up and more on taking up some additional task or behaviour as sacrifice to focus on spiritual diligence. The key is our Lenten observances should require unaccustomed effort. For example, I could say that I will give up bananas for Lent. I loathe bananas and everything that tastes of them. For to me to say, I am giving up bananas for Lent is idiotic and entirely self-deluding. I haven't eaten a banana in more than forty years. Just as idiotic and self-indulgent it would be for me to say I will go to bakeries and buy a pastry every day for Lent. It might be appropriate for me to say, I will give up tea for Lent and spend time each morning with a cup of hot water, to use Roman Catholic language, offering up my sense of loss as a discipline to focus on my self-examination. I might also take the money I would have spent on tea and give it to the food bank. Alternately I might take on an extra task or set of tasks as a way to focus on my self-reflection – preferably something that draws no attention, but makes a difference to others. In short in Lent, we should examine ourselves, catalogue our self-delusions, and work mightily to give them up. If we could pull that off, it would, indeed, be a Holy Lent.

Our reading from Luke this evening is an ideal introduction to Lent. We have two seriously flawed characters, the Pharisee and the tax collector. I think it helpful to think of them as polar caricatures. The Pharisee is a paragon of self-satisfaction and the tax-collector is a paragon of self condemnation. One Lenten discipline that all of us might consider is really pushing ourselves on which of them am I most like? Which of them is the more self-deluded and what does that say about me? Even five minutes each day spent contemplating those 2 questions might be a fine Lenten discipline. Most of us would like to be like the Pharisee in the discipline of our religious observances, but how do we avoid being like the Pharisee in self-satisfaction and contempt for others? Indeed, one might argue the Pharisee's punctiliousness in religious practice is destructive because in truth in his self congratulation about it, it alienates him from both God and neighbour, I am reminded of Robert Burns' poem, Holy Wullie's Prayer. I am going to translate slightly out of the Scots given that it is Deb who has to read this homily: *I bless and praise Thy matchless might,/when thousands Thou has left in night,/ that I am here before Thy sight for gifts and grace/ A burning and a shining light to all this place.* I think it captures the Pharisee's attitude beautifully. I encourage you to read the whole poem. If you are unfortunate enough not to own a copy of Burns' poetry, you can Google it and get the complete text.

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The tax collector on the surface is the more attractive character. He appears to have no allusions about his condition. He appears to know that only with God's mercy can he change. But we know so little of him. In this story his wish to repent may be entirely genuine. Or is he a serial practitioner of self-abasement who is all too comfortable in his "sin"? I am sure we have all known tiresome people whose standard, regularly used line is something along the lines of "oh, I'm not good enough, smart enough, or good looking enough to…." If our tax collector goes forth and makes a genuine effort to change then one can only support him however one can, and pray that he will be able to repent. If he makes the genuine effort to change, buts falls back, then we pray that he may turn again from his sin. For who are we to condemn someone who falls away? How many times have we fallen away? If Jesus is prepared to forgive us 70 times 7, how can we do less for others. It is the genuineness of intention and preparedness to turn away from destructive behaviour again and again that characterizes the faithful. On the other hand, if the tax collector is there simply for show, to be seen to be repentant, with every intention of returning to his evil ways, then he is no more justified than the Pharisee.

As I write this, I am reminded of an expression from my working class Scottish childhood. Anyone who was seen to be putting on airs and pretending to be of a better class than others was often described as having "a fur coat and nae drawers." Well that is certainly the Pharisee – all the outward appearance of piety without the support garment of humility underneath it. We don't know about the tax collector, we do know that if he truly means to repent he does go home justified.

Let me take a just a moment to comment on the words righteous and justified. In our passage Jesus describes his audience for this parable as *some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.* Then Jesus says of the tax collector, *I tell you, this man went down to his home justified.* Righteousness and Justice in all their forms are synonyms. While we tend to think of justice as related to punishment for the breaking of laws, in Hebrew and in the Greek of the Christian Scriptures both words mean being in right relationship to God and to neighbour. I can be neither righteous or just because I simply don't break laws. I can only reach for those qualities if I am dedicated to God in my life and the welfare of my neighbours. Remember the saying from Matthew 5: *Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.* Reconciliation means having justice – right relationship – between you.

So in summary Lent means genuine self-reflection, serious effort to remove self delusions, and a rededication to the love of God and Neighbour. May we all have a truly holy Lent.

Amen