

## Last after Trinity: The Pharisee, and the Tax Collector, and Racism (Luke 18)

What prompted Jesus to tell the parable we have just heard? Helpfully, St Luke leaves us in no doubt: it is the issue of righteousness and those who trust in their own righteousness - their own goodness, how well they adhere to the law.

But I'd like to suggest that, in light of the fuller sweep of Jesus' life in the Gospels, the parable can provoke us to think about more than only *individual* goodness. We may hear the parable and think the essence is this:

The Pharisee's self-righteousness is a sin worse than the sins the tax collector committed.

His sin outranks the tax collectors'; that's why Jesus sides with the tax collector.

BUT I believe the parable can say more to us today, though, than only "don't be proud, don't be self-righteous". Therefore, let us consider the broader picture into which individual good and bad deeds fits. We'll do so by focusing on a specific theme relevant to our time and place.

Some of you may be aware that October is Black History Month in the UK. Black

History month is a time of celebrating the personal and collective stories of black people in our country and beyond. It is also a month in which to acknowledge whose stories are often suppressed, whose histories are rarely told.

We can also use this time to consider whose *theology* is allowed to shape our Church, and whose theology and concerns are ignored.

James Cone, often cited as the godfather of Black Theology, has challenged prevailing thinking in the West, especially among white Christians, about God, sin, and justice.

Cone and his successors in theological departments and churches have called Christians to acknowledge how much of our theology has ignored the voices of black people, and also how it has actively or tacitly perpetuated racial injustice.

Often this has been due to flawed understandings of sin and justice, or from reading the Bible in ways which are narrow and biased. While white Christianity has largely focused only sins of the individual and their forgiveness, James Cone offers a much richer theology. It wrestles with societal sin, corporate responsibility, and the need for justice alongside forgiveness.

It is easy for white people, like me, to be in denial of their privilege and participation in systemic racism because “racism” is too often viewed primarily or solely as the individual sin of racial prejudice.

In these terms, racial justice then becomes just “let’s be nicer to each other, let’s try to be ‘colour blind’ and get over our obsession with the colour of each other’s skin.”

But that is not enough. It can even do more harm than good by ignoring how deeply embedded racism is in Society as a whole, and in Church.

Think about what happens when a politician or celebrity is accused of speaking or acting in a racist manner. The reaction is usually for them to be aghast and affronted: “how dare you accuse me of being a racist! that’s awful”.

It is as if the only crime worse than being racist is to accuse someone else of being racist.

Why?

Because this particular sin is reduced to the personal level. Righteousness then is also reduced down to individual deeds, separate from the bigger picture of life.

The defence is usually then focused entirely on self-justification whether with the cliched “I can’t be racist because some of my best friends are black” line or simply asserting “I’m the least racist person I know.”

Why is this a problem?

**First, it shows a self-obsession:** “I must look innocent in the eyes of everyone because I seek their high regard.” There’s fear of publicly admitting “maybe I was wrong” or taking on board criticism because what matters in this outlook is being seen as righteous.

**Second, it treats racism is simply a personal sin. To do so, of course, is to miss the core of racism as a structural evil, as a whole complex web of powers, histories, and systems.**

We can use all the right words and none of the wrong ones and feel self-satisfied in being good people...but still uphold a racist system.

Racism is better understood as something which has infected and diseased to a greater or lesser extent, all white-dominated institutions for hundreds years. It has even been the foundation of some. That applies here in the UK, as well as elsewhere

It is a systemic sin that tragically many remain ignorant of or in denial about as long as racism is treated simply as individual sin. I can be like the Pharisee of the parable and be quite good, quite respectful and diligent, but still uphold an evil system.

Racism is about more than just me: it's about how I have benefitted from long-standing injustices, however unaware of them I may be, even if they're strictly speaking not my fault.

It's about how others are oppressed by systems constructed which don't allow people to flourish, however hard they work, however good they are.

I hope you'll be able to see how this might relate to what is going on in this parable, and how we are all susceptible to the very tendency Jesus warned against.

**Even in this sermon, am I not in danger of sounding a bit like the Pharisee?**

*“Dear Lord, thank goodness I am not a racist like some of our top political leaders or celebrities.”*

To quote D.G. Martin, a white American pastor, *“When it comes to racism, I am like the Pharisee. I am giving thanks that I am not a racist, rather than humbly accepting responsibility for the racism that is still embedded in me and as well as that which is still unpurged from society.”*

I can be a very respectable, kind person and still fail to really grasp what righteousness is. My neighbour, on the other hand, may have the kind of pattern of life I look down my nose at, may have all manner of “social problems”...but nevertheless grasp who God truly is and be in right relationship with God.

Addressing the oppression of the poor, and black people in particular, was at the heart of James Cone's work. When it came to the sins of racism, he spoke plainly and bluntly:

*“There can be no forgiveness of sins without repentance, and no repentance without the gift of faith to struggle with and for the freedom of the oppressed. When whites undergo the true experience of conversion wherein they die to whiteness and are reborn anew in order to struggle against white oppression and for the liberation of the oppressed, there is a place for them in the black struggle of freedom.”*

By dying to **whiteness** Cone does not mean hating the colour of your skin. James Cone was not anti-white people, he was not a so-called “reverse racist.”

What he means is for white people to be prepared to reject the systems, assumptions and attitudes which elevate white people above all others, which maintain the privilege that comes with being white. He is calling for a conversion from a view of the world which sees whiteness as the pinnacle of humanity, as being closest to God, to goodness, to purity.

In short, dying to privilege and to superiority. "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" Jesus taught - and warned.

*There is a bigger picture when it comes to sin and goodness that simply how I think or behave personally, in an isolated way.*

For James Cone, righteousness was about hungering, thrusting and working for a justice society where racial prejudice and violence was eradicated. For some of us, that means a call to greater humility.

Sin is a system we are all bound up in. Racism is one example of systemic sin. There are many others too, of course.

The problem is bigger than you or me, the solution can't just be you or me trying to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.

We need to learn, instead, a wholly different way of seeing ourselves, sin and God.

Jesus presents a different view of God from that which seemed to prevail among many then whether Pharisee or not, and among many people, Christian or otherwise, today.

Jesus teaches us that God is the One who has mercy on ALL who turn to him, aware of their sin, their need, and even just the smallest beginning of desire to be changed.

Jesus, though, *also* challenges us with the notion that God, in a way, does take sides: choosing to stand with those who are oppressed and weighed down, whether by their own sin or that of others.

As James Cone taught, this is God of the Oppressed who calls for the privileged to be converted. This God calls those with privilege to love and work for the liberation of those who are wounded and trampled down by our world's injustices.

As well as challenge, there is hope in our Gospel today.

There is mercy, being made right with God.

The tax collector seeks forgiveness.

He knows he sins, therefore he is in need of mercy.

His prayer is the first step towards the true God as he throws himself on the mercy of the God.

God calls us today to humility, and to stop simply placing ourselves and others into boxes of "good" and "bad", or "racist" and "couldn't possibly be racist!" Instead let us spend our energy asking ourselves "how might I be a healing, reconciling, transforming presence in your world?"

Amen.