



Sermon: - 23rd October 2016

The Heart of the Matter

Psalm 119:97-104, 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14

'There's no such thing as bad publicity!' who said that? It was attributed to Phineas T. Barnum, the 19th century American showman and circus owner. Barnum was a self-publicist of the first order and never missed an opportunity to present his wares to the public. Whether or not he said it, the expression began to be used in the early 20th century. I suppose another way of putting it is, as Oscar Wilde expressed it, "The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about". Some people manage to be talked about all the time.

I don't know if you remember Donald Trump's wife Melania's speech on the first night of the Republican National Convention. It apparently plagiarised parts of a Michelle Obama speech. Donald Trump's response was "the good news is, Melania's speech got more publicity than any in the history of politics, especially if you believe that all press is good press!"

Is all publicity good publicity? Let ask the Pharisees. Because some would say that the Pharisees get a bad press. In the New Testament they are painted as the baddies, along with the Sadducees and priests. This is slightly ironic as the Sadducees and Pharisees were hugely antagonistic to one another, however in the New Testament they are portrayed as allies against the perceived threat that Jesus presented. Is this entirely fair, however? When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments he didn't give an awful lot of information about how to keep them. For example, the third commandment, which is, as of course you all know, "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy". However it's not clear from this what it means to keep the Sabbath holy and what would constitute breaking the commandment. Clearly if you want to keep the commandments you have to know when you might be breaking them. In answer to this problem the Pharisees, who claimed authority from Moses for their interpretation, drew up rules and regulations which they intended would assist people in determining how to keep the commandments. It was meant to make it easier not harder. A clear set of instructions to follow which would ensure that you knew what you were doing and so could keep the commandments without too much difficulty. As we know this backfired somewhat and people found the commandments even harder to keep; the rules and regulations too pernicky, too

exacting, and too rigorous and demanding to be easy to keep. But the intention was good. And so we have this Pharisee who is a very fine fellow indeed. In the first place he thanks God, fasts twice in the week, and all this to honour God. Secondly he gives a tenth of all his goods as an offering to God, he has never committed adultery, nor stolen, nor murdered, nor does he covet what his neighbour has. In fact he has conducted himself in an exemplary manner. Isn't this amazing! Here we have someone who actually manages to keep the commandments! How many of us could live such a commendable and perfect life! And yet, Luke tells us that all the work of the Pharisee is blasphemy. Martin Luther comments, "God help us, what an awful sentence this is! Priests and nuns may well be terrified by it, and all their bones quake, as you scarcely ever find one of them as pious as this Pharisee. Would to God we could have many such hypocrites and Pharisees; for then they could be taught better things."

And yet in spite of all his efforts, in spite of his exemplary behaviour, in spite of his faithfulness, he is criticised by Jesus, not commended. What can possibly explain this? Well, perhaps it's because he boasted about it. And certainly at face value that seems to be what the problem is. He paraded his goodness, he sang his own praises, he blew his own trumpet, and in this was his mistake. But I have a problem with this suggestion, this interpretation.

My problem is this; what's the difference between Paul's boasting and the Pharisee's? Paul, it seems to me is rather good at blowing his own trumpet, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day". That sounds rather boastful does it not? So is that not a problem?

At this point it might be helpful to bring in the tax collector. Perhaps his behaviour and situation can shed some light on the problem. As I am sure you are aware tax collectors in biblical times were even more unpopular than are tax collectors today. Tax collectors in New Testament times had a habit of lining their own pockets as well as collecting legitimate taxes, they were wealthy on the proceeds of their dishonesty and they were amongst the most despised groups in New Testament society. So this tax collector comes to the synagogue and is quite honest about his wrongdoings. Yet he is the one who Jesus commends! So wait a minute, the Pharisee who lives basically a good life is condemned and the crook is commended. Pharisees boasting is condemned yet Paul seems to boast quite comfortably. It does seem rather as if there are some double standards operating here. Is it better to be a crook than to be honest? Is it sometimes okay to boast?

The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, has quite a lot of boasting. 93 examples, in fact. But surprisingly, not all the examples are portrayed negatively. Paul in particular uses the word boast in a positive fashion. But always, when it is used positively, he boasts in the Lord. All that Paul does, he tells us, is for the sake of the gospel. And here we come to the heart of the matter, and if we turn once again to Martin Luther, he explains it succinctly, "Well, what is the matter with the good man? Only this, he does not know his own heart." It comes down to motive. Paul's motive is that God is glorified. The tax collector's motive is that he is forgiven for his wrongdoing. The Pharisee's motive is that he is praised and his righteousness is recognised. Of the three of them he is the one who is acting out of self-interest rather than for God's glory. Paul says, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Paul's boasting has no basis in his own attributes, his own efforts, or his own gifts and skills. The single thing that he has brought to the relationship he has with Christ is his faithfulness to his master. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Any other success he has is credited to God. The tax collector of course is not boasting. He is fully aware of how far short of perfect he falls. He stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

Paul knew his own heart, and knew that the glory for his successes belonged to God; that he had achieved all the good that he had achieved by the grace of God. The tax collector knew his own heart, and knew that the responsibility for his failures was his alone and he was totally dependent on the grace of God. The Pharisee alone took credit for the good that he done.

And today as we approach this table we are asked to examine our own hearts. If we were to look into the 'Mirror of Erised' what desires would we see reflected there? If we were to look into the wicked Queen's mirror what truth would it tell us about the desires of our hearts? What today's passages tell us about God is that what matters to him above keeping the letter of the law, above the sterile righteousness of doing good for the sake of appearing good, above socially acceptable behaviour, is truth and an honest heart prepared to admit fault. Humility is a difficult thing, as soon as you think you've got it you've lost it. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to get it, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't cultivate a humble attitude. As we approach this table today what is in our hearts? Do we come feeling satisfied that we live a good life? Do we come confident in our

own ability to keep the word of God? Or do we come asking for God's grace, knowing that without it we would be unable to live a good life or to keep his word or to do anything worthy of praise? Do we come knowing that all the good that we do has its source in the ground of all good? Do we come knowing that the gifts we have, the talents we enjoy, all that makes us who we are and all in which we rejoice is the gift of God? The heart of the matter is, that it is a matter of the heart, a humble heart is a sacrifice acceptable to God, and if we humble ourselves before him, then we will be exalted.