



Ord Sunday 30

THE NEW SHOFAR

God be merciful to me a sinner

Those who exalt themselves will be humbled!

It is not by my might that I will prevail (2:9).

Hannah's song (and a song it is) is offered as the perfect response for someone who has come to understand how God is the only enduring source of the power to transform life. Her witness has been her preparedness to reject the temptation to believe she could maintain control over her destiny. By placing her future into the hands of God, she not only had her prayers answered but she also played a significant part in the saving works of God. She gave birth to the great prophet Samuel.

Hers is a message for all generations and we can see it resonate in our world today. The "me", the "I" and the "we" now dominate and the divisions between the haves and the have-nots increases. There are now more "outsiders" than there are "insiders" and we seem to be striving as a nation to find new ways of defining ourselves off from others – I am...gay, black, Asian, trans, white, of the Left, the Right, gay, hetero, young, a believer or a non-believer, a Bible Christian...the list could go on forever. The message of the Kingdom to which Jesus gave witness, about which he preached and taught is all about inclusivity. In the Kingdom *there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*. Hannah sought to discern the will of God in the world, rather than trying to take control of her part of it.

When I am tempted to despair, let me find hope (St Francis of Assisi)

When we first encounter Hannah, she is bitter, angry at God and filled with despair at what she sees as being a barren life. In her own words, she was a *worthless woman*. She was a broken person living in tumultuous times. She *was taunted* by family and friends because of her failure to achieve the standards set for women in her society. As she gazed around, she could find little to offer her light, few ways of lightening what she saw as her burden in life. However, it was her enduring faith in the love and mercy of God that sustained her and lifted her up beyond her human limitations.

What she did was *pour out her soul before Yahweh her God*. She well understood how she had exhausted every possible human road to life. She could do no more. The world could do no more. If there was any chance of finding hope, a way forward, an opportunity to have her life transformed, that way had to be found in God and what the loving God wanted to achieve through her.

God's way is not always the way of men and women!

St Paul said it well... *But God chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong;*²⁸ *God chooses what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,*²⁹ *so that no one might boast in the presence of God.* Hannah could sing with joy this great hymn because she was a witness to all Paul is saying here. Whether we speak of individuals or of faith communities, our hope for the future lies not in what we can manage on our own, but rather on what we will allow God to do in us.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

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This is a story about “them” and not me! Surely?

Part of what Luke is saying to his own Church in presenting today’s parable is a warning as to how there is a little bit of this pharisee in all of us. Unless we can accept this and present ourselves humbly before God for healing, we can never find the blessings of the Kingdom.

Our claims to sinlessness do not equate to being “good with God”

The words of the Pharisee are formulated as a boast and they represent a standard catalogue of his own virtues: at least as he sees them. There are negatives – the kinds of things that he has not done (not broken the Ten Commandments) and a positive – he is not like this toll-collector. It is this single negative that stands out as the most arrogant of his claims, a presumptive arrogance for which he has no justification. The toll-collector is presented in stark contrast. He does not even lift his eyes towards heaven (God), he beats his breast and confesses his sins. These are the very actions that mark him as being a righteous man because he is made righteous not by his own actions but by the grace of God.

This is the challenging part of the story. The Pharisee avoided sins but is not righteous while the other man acknowledges how he is a sinful person and yet is declared to be righteous.

Can we name our sins and then do something about them?

Jesus reminds us that uprightness before God is not to be obtained through our own efforts. It can only be built up by grace and through an honest and contrite understanding and acceptance of our own sinfulness. Counter-intuitively, we are called upon to identify ourselves with the toll-collector. **All are sinners** in the eyes of God (this cannot be stressed enough), all are in need of forgiveness and there is always the danger that we have more self-confidence in our own righteousness before God than we should have... *Luke’s challenge: name those sins before God.*

In the context of Luke’s own community, the parable serves as a warning that our love of God can so easily turn into a form of self-love where our way is the best way, the only way to God - as well as into a loathing of others. Our love for God can become a possession we hoard, show off in all kinds of ways and use as a weapon in our assessment of others. Even the prayer of the Pharisee here is an example of his sin. He is praying in the Temple, presumably with his eyes directed towards heaven, as was the custom, but all the time his peripheral vision was picking up on what was going on around him. His lips were saying one thing but there were other things in his heart.

Perhaps even worse than this hypocrisy is his presumption as to how God will look at the world through the eyes of this Pharisee. He sees the tax collector as a sinner and the rest of the community as being guilty of adultery, theft and evil. It is his way of reminding God what *others* are like and so how *they* should be treated! The toll-collector, in contrast, is aware of his own sinfulness and his need for the gift of righteousness that he could never achieve through his own efforts. He understands that it is something that comes only as a free gift from God. It is his willingness to (a) acknowledge his sins, then (b) to make the effort to come before God and (c) confess them and finally and so very importantly, (d) commit to doing something, to seek to make up for the harm done by his sins. This is what makes him the model for Christian disciples. He possibly had many reasons for making judgmental comments about the Pharisee, but he said nothing. If our Church and our world could look on self and others in this manner, what a peace filled world God would be able to grow for us and through us. This transformation of the world begins with us, one on one with others.

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