

A rather pompous landowner met a local farmer one morning and said to him: 'Why, farmer Brown, you're getting quite bent. Why don't you stand up straight like me?' In reply, Farmer Brown said: 'Do you see that field of corn over there?' And when the other nodded, went on, 'Well you'll notice that the full heads hang down and the empty ones stand up'.

The Pharisee prays aloud so that others, including the tax collector, can hear him. He's using the prayer as a weapon. Probably no one is quite as off-putting as this Pharisee. We may well have similar traits but don't want to recognise them in ourselves.

The Pharisee's problem is that the only way he knows he's good is that he's got this low-life tax-collector standing behind him. Many people only know they are good because someone else is bad or less good than they are. We have all played that game.

You hear people say: 'I may not be the best catholic mother/father/priest/person in the world but at least I'm not as bad as so-and-so'. That's the righteousness we award ourselves – self-righteousness. Our goodness is only goodness compared with someone else's badness or less than goodness. That's the position of the Pharisee. I can always think of someone who is worse than I am. That's a very easy game to play

Maybe the little virtue I have comes fairly easily because that's the way I was brought up. My parents instilled in me that I have to be honest. It's no effort for me not to steal – if I did my parents would have gone ballistic. But someone else may be really struggling with honesty and when they succeed in not stealing, that's a real breakthrough – it will have cost them ten times more effort that it would have cost me.

The Pharisees prayer is bogus because it's exonerating himself at the expense of the poor tax collector. In no way does he lay himself open to God's mercy. In the real sense he doesn't need God and he imagines that with a few good works he can buy his way into God's good books.

The Publican confesses his own sins not someone else's. His goodness is not in rivalry with anyone else's. For our prayer to be genuine we cannot but stand in the position of the tax collector. That is not the same as beating ourselves up or loading ourselves with self-contempt. It's realising that we're all at the mercy of God's mercy. Our witness, our good deeds, are a response to His love but they don't buy our way into God's Kingdom.

*Whatever my public image is, whatever my position in society is, I don't need to try and look respectable before God – in fact I can't. I am what I am before God and nothing more. Like the Publican I stand before Him as a sinner and that's a good place to begin.*