

*Probably no one is quite as off-putting as the Pharisee in today's story. We may well have similar traits but don't want to recognise them in ourselves.*

The Pharisee's problem is that he prides himself on being good and virtuous at the expenses of this low-life tax-collector kneeling at the back. Many people try and convince themselves they are good because someone else is bad or less good than they are. We have all played that game. *A good example might be the much maligned Magdalene laundries in 1940/50's Ireland. The church, the State the families involved and indeed society at large, whether rightly or wrongly, all tolerated the setting up of these laundries for unmarried mothers in the first place. But if most of the later guilt can be foisted onto the church, a soft target, then the others involved may feel a lot less bad about themselves – they may even be tempted to absolve themselves completely. That's the mind-set of the Pharisee.*

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 - it's called self-righteousness and the Pharisee in today's gospel is a good example of it. 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 in order to make myself look better.

Maybe the little virtue I have comes fairly easily because that's the way I've been brought up. My parents, for instance instilled in me that I must 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

not to steal that it would have cost me. And it's the same with other sins.

The Pharisee's prayer is bogus because it's exonerating himself at the expense of the poor tax collector. In no way does he see himself indebted to God's mercy. In stark contrast the tax-collector's only prayer is a cry for mercy. In the real sense the Pharisee doesn't need God and he imagines that with a few good works which he keeps bragging about, he can buy his way into God's good books.

The tax collector confesses his own sins not someone else's. His goodness or even his badness for that matter, is not in rivalry with anyone else's. For our prayer to be genuine we cannot but stand alongside him. That is not the same as beating ourselves up or being filled with self-loathing. 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 His Kingdom as the Pharisee thought.

*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 tax collector I stand before Him as a sinner relying on His mercy and leave the rest in His capable hands.*