

## PENTECOST 17

**'Lord of all power and might**, the author and giver of all good things: graft in our hearts the love of your name, increase in us true religion....' (The collect for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost.)

What is true religion? What is the essential quality which makes religion true? The history of religion in the human race is a catalogue of war, violence and division. It would be foolish to attempt to win someone over to become a member of the church on the grounds that religion was a good thing for human beings. It all depends, as the professor says, on what you mean by religion.

Real, genuine holiness, when you discover it in someone like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, is a beautiful and unmistakable quality which does not need to be defined in theological terms. Such people have a divine charisma which is instantly recognisable by believer and pagan alike - it is pure goodness.

But when holiness turns into 'holier than thou-ness' - righteousness turns into self-righteousness - this is an abomination to a Holy God and every honest man. I think that problem lies in the hangups we have about sin.

A lady - newly converted to the christian faith - once asked me this question. She said "I'm a new christian - I love God, and want to please him, but I find that I still sin against him. What am I to do?"

It is a question which has troubled Christians down the ages. St. Paul himself said "In my inmost self I dearly love

God's law, but I can see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law which my reason dictates. This", said Paul, "is what makes me a prisoner. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?" St. Paul concludes by saying "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord." In other words, Jesus Christ himself is the answer to this dilemma - he died so that we may be forgiven. But it is an inner struggle in which we are all involved - it is a creative tension - through which we can grow - or it is a destructive force within us which can tear us apart. It depends on how we respond to the offer of salvation through Jesus Christ. On the one hand there is the danger of escapism into a 'holier than thou' attitude which pretends that sin has been conquered in us. We become as the pharisees 'aware only of our goodness'. Dr. Spurgeon, a distinguished Baptist preacher of the last century, once said that a certain man in his congregation was the holiest man he had ever known - until one day the man told him so himself!

In order to rebuke those who were 'sure of their own goodness' Jesus told the story of the Pharisee and the Publican.

Pharisees were very religious people in Israel. They were a self-righteous lot - though not all of them I'm sure - but many of them felt that they were a cut above the rest who, in their opinion did not properly keep the Ten Commandments and all the other religious rules and regulations of the Law of Moses.

The Publicans (Incidentally, a Publican in the New Testament is a tax collector - a civil servant - not a Landlord - that's another funny title!) anyway, the Publicans worked for the Romans and made a handsome profit on the side. They were well known as a bunch of rogues.

In the story, the Pharisee swaggers up to the Temple - takes his familiar seat and proceeds to tell God that he's been a tower of righteousness all the week.

The Publican stands in a quiet corner of the Temple with his eyes fixed on the ground (not daring to look up to heaven). In deep sorrow he quotes Psalm 51, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' He is a rogue - his private life would not bear scrutiny. But he knows it - and is prepared to be honest to God. "It was this man, the tax-collector, and not the Pharisee who went home, forgiven" said Jesus.

The self righteousness of the Pharisee is still to be seen in religious people. We still produce in our actions and in our attitudes that unlovely religiosity which Jesus hammered in this parable. The church continues to produce her share of religious connoisseurs.

But there is another extreme which is evident too often in the church - the parable has been so well taught and so piously received by many generations of church people, that we are forever crying out for mercy - forever beating our breasts with our eyes fixed on the ground, that we fail to receive his forgiveness. Jesus wants us to rise up and walk - your sins have been forgiven - so get up and go. In the Book of Common Prayer on which many of us were weaned, we say in confession - "the burden of them (our sins) is intolerable" - or so we say. But we don't really want to receive into our hearts the words of absolution - "pardon and deliver you from all your sins; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness".

At the first opportunity we are back on our knees crying "God, be merciful to me, a sinner". There can be a kind of

refusal to accept that we are forgiven and liberated. We can find a strange sort of security in hanging on to our sins - like the people of Israel wanted to go back into slavery in Egypt, rather than face the uncertainties which freedom offered them. This is equally as damaging as the self-righteousness of the Pharisees - it prevents our growth.

So let's not be too hard on the Pharisee. At least he realised that there was some value in living a life which was pleasing to God, and that life was possible by the grace of God.

Let's be aware that religious hangups can inhibit the growth of the kingdom of God within each of us and in the world around us. Divisions between christian denominations, divisions between the worlds religions are the causes of violence and bitterness. The writer of our New Testament lesson for today sweeps aside all religious hangups when he defines true religion. He says, "The kind of religion which is without stain or fault in the sight of God our Father is this: to go to the help of orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself untarnished by the world." This is essentially quite practical and down to earth.

**AMEN**