

1] There are two types of people in the world: those who believe that there are two types of people in the world and those who don't! I am very firmly among the latter. People's characters are not so fixed. If that were so, if people cannot change, then the whole message of the gospel would be hollow and meaningless; the sacred ministry, ineffectual and without purpose; our preaching, mere clamour and a babble of sound without reason. To quote Shakespeare's Macbeth, "*A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*"

2] It is tempting to think of these two characters today, the tax-collector and the pharisee, as just two types of people: you are either one or the other; either the repentant sinner on the one hand, or the self-righteous egotist on the other. But people's characters are not so fixed.

3] It is true, of course, that before too long we shall hear again the gospel of the Judgement, the parable of the sheep and the goats. There indeed, at the consummation of Time, when the goal of our salvation story is reached, there will be two types of people only: the redeemed and the lost. But that is not now, not in this world. That will be at the General Resurrection and the Judgement, in the new world when the sons of God will be revealed and, in the words of the Wisdom of Solomon [3:7] at their visitation, the souls of the righteous will shine forth and run like sparks through straw.

4] The point here, is that the gospel itself is built upon the very idea that we *can* change! People's characters are not so fixed. If we cannot change and be changed, then, there can be no gospel and there can be no salvation for us. Our message to the world, remember, starts with a call to repentance, to change. This, after all, is what the tax-collector in today's parable represents. He has come to the point where he has changed his mind about his entire way of life.

5] No doubt, some will object and ask, how long will this last? How long will his resolution to amend his life endure? Perhaps, from time

to time, the tax-collector himself in the past would also have played the pharisee, justifying himself, bargaining with God, defending his actions. It is an interesting characteristic of human beings that they will never judge themselves frankly and openly as evil; no one does. No matter how heinous the crime, there always follows a justification, a pre-determining reason for their actions, casting the blame on society, or the *system*, psychological weakness, the influence of other, malign people. But none of this stands up before the judgement of the Living God.

6] The pharisee stands beside himself and from the outside, like Narcissus, as it were, admires what he sees, finding much with which to commend himself to God. The tax-collector, however, has looked into his own heart. Now he sees himself as God sees him, as when God anointed David as the shepherd-king of Israel, paying no heed to the appearance but rather to what is within. As God says to Samuel, *'For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'* [1 Kings/Sam.16]

7] Today we have begun the Triodion, the liturgical book that takes us up to Pascha. We begin the Great Fast on the eleventh of March. As the world turns, as time moves forward, once more we are invited to prepare. It was the wisdom of the fathers who constructed the liturgical calendar of the Church, to build into it the repeating call of the gospel: *repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!* No one entering the Church, whether for the very first time, or we ourselves, here once more, being anything more than a mere casual bystander, can expect to remain the same. If we have truly come here today to worship the living God then we cannot expect to walk out of these doors unchanged in some way.

8] Unless we have been deaf to the words we have heard, prayed all these years without attention, practiced the rules of religion with a heart grow cold, we know that our spiritual hope and longing is founded upon the mystery of change, or repentance and forgiveness, of a new life in Christ. To deny that, to say that the proverbial leopard does not change his spots; that what's bred in the bone is fixed, must be a primal heresy, the it denies the power of the grace of God.

9] We have, of course, an advantage over those outside the Church. Many of them know about the importance of changing how they live. They have all sorts of schemes and plans, policies and systems, constructed to help them become what they think are better people. Why? Because they want to be accepted above all; to be seen as *normal*. They have new year's resolutions, fitness programmes, specialised diets, life coaches, inspirational and motivational speakers, courses in mindfulness and anger management. They can signal their virtue and grandstand their own morality - just like the pharisee! Only they tell it all to an all-pervasive, all-revealing and all-seeing social media on the Internet: their new substitute in the secularised world for what was once in their culture the omniscient and omnipresent mind of God.

10] But none of this will redeem their souls, yet we have an advantage over those outside the Church. Our changing, our hope, is not for this world only. And our repentance does not depend on our own efforts alone. For we have the grace of God that comes to us through the Holy Mysteries of the Church and what is lacking from the weakness of our own stumbling efforts is completed by the power of God.

11] And we have all we need for that in that common life we share in the Church: in the services here, or when we stand before the holy icons, whether here or at home; when we pray; when we read and study the Scriptures, when we fast and when we give alms, the only mindfulness, the only attentiveness we need is that of Christ ever before us. Paying heed to the teachings of the fathers who wrote and compiled that treasury of spiritual endeavour, *The Philokalia*, it is sobriety and watchfulness that we should train our minds in, especially at this season of preparation for the Great Fast. As Christ says in St Mark's gospel, '*Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming... lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!*' [Mk.13:35-37]

12] To become like Christ, to restore fully the image and likeness of God, is a great struggle, and many times we shall fall back and play

the part of the self-righteous Pharisee of the parable today. But we can also turn around and we have, thanks be to God, the mystery of Confession, where we can stand like the tax-collector, not blaming circumstance or other people for our fallings into sin, but opening up the heart, not for retribution and punishment - as is stored up for those who will not repent and change - but to find forgiveness and healing for our souls.

13] *'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.'* In this present age, in these, the last days of Man, there are not two kinds of people in this world, there is only one kind, though he be a fallen creature, he is still made in the image and likeness of God. In our baptism that same image was again revealed in us, once covered by Sin, and our struggle now is to regain the likeness.

14] Do not forget that the devil suggests one of two pernicious ideas in the hearts of everyone, tempting them to remain just as they are. Either he intimates that you are fine just as you are, you don't need to change; or he implies that there is no hope for you, what is the point of even trying? He is lying, of course. Let these days of preparation remind us that we start again. No matter how advanced we might be, or whether we have yet to make a real beginning, none of us remains untouched, unsullied by this world. Prefigured in the children of Israel of old, we journey towards the kingdom of God now. But it is time to stop, to check our route, to refresh ourselves and start out once more; to become once again an image of the repentant tax-collector. As St Paul tells the Ephesians, *'See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.'* [Eph.5:15-16]