

1] There is a whole world of characters to be found in the parables of Christ. Reading His parables in the gospels, we discover all kinds of people, the types who would have inhabited that world of the first century Roman imperial province of Judea. These are the various Jews, gentiles and Samaritans who form the cast of these small dramas that teach us the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

2] Searching through St Luke's gospel we find a farmer broadcasting his seed, a humane Samaritan, a rich hoarder, soon to perish; there are masters and servants, good and bad; thieves who break into houses and the owners of vineyards. We find women baking leavened bread and someone planting mustard seeds. There are reluctant guests invited to great supper; there are tower builders, estimating costs and a king going out to war. We come across an arrogant and godless judge, vexed by a litigious and persistent widow. We hear of a shepherd, seeking a stray sheep, a woman anxious to find a lost coin. And even a wayward son, mispending his inheritance, of whom we shall hear next Sunday.

3] And with these familiar characters, today we come across a tax collector, a collaborator with the Roman regime, where the right to demand tribute was farmed out to locals who grew richer than most, able to take out their own portion from the money they extorted from the poor. How they must have been hated, these publicani, as they were called in Latin. They were despised, treated as outcasts by pious Jews, who regarded even their money as unclean; they would not allow them to give tithes to the temple or accept their testimony in a trial.

4] Jesus Himself, of course, had met tax collectors before. He had seen them coming out to be baptised by John the Forerunner. And as we heard two weeks ago, He met one called Zacchaeus. And then there was Matthew or Levi, to give him his Hebrew name, whom He called to leave the tax office and follow Him, and at whose house He dined, against all pious convention.

5] Perhaps Jesus has these two real characters in mind when he constructed the parable that we heard this morning. In His mind's eye is this, perhaps, Zacchaeus, or is this Levi, standing in the temple today: the very image of humble repentance? The story brings to mind what I spoke about two weeks ago: conversion, repentance and change. Clearly, within the context of first century Judaism, we can presume that neither of these two characters, the Pharisee and the Publican, need conversion; both believe already in the LORD, the living God of Israel. Both are seen praying in the temple of God, pictured in this parable, forty years before its destruction by the Romans. But only one knows what it is to repent; only one has changed his mind about himself; only one sees himself through the eyes of the God to whom he prays.

6] Unless we have studied the context; unless we know the historical setting here, it is, perhaps, difficult for us to appreciate the effect this parable would have had on its first hearers. We in our day cannot just equate this Publicanus, this tax collector, with the modern, dutiful and efficient staff who work for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. We might use our imagination and translate the term Publican instead into someone in our own day who takes money from the poor: a pay-day lender, a loan shark, for example. Maybe, then, we can draw nearer to the real impact of this

story, where the one justified by God is not the self-righteous, the respectable but rather, the despised, the rejected, the outcast.

7] Conversion to the living God, to find Christ, is the start of our new life; the discovery of the right road, the very Way. Repentance is an opening of our inner eyes, an examination of the heart, as seen by the eyes of God; not just guilt and shame for the past, but a realisation and grief for what we should have been, and a longing for what we could be, acquiring the mind of Christ.

8] But conversion and repentance: the right faith and the true mind, are not the completion of our salvation but indeed, the means toward its end. The point is that we should be changed! What place in the Kingdom of God for a repentant first-century tax collector who, having repented of his extortion and avarice, continues with his old ways?

9] Earlier in St Luke's gospel [Lk.3:10-14] those who repented at the River Jordan, asked the Baptist what they should actually do. They have repented, awaiting the coming of the Messiah: but how are they to change? As Luke writes:

So the people asked him, saying, "*What shall we do then?*" He answered and said to them, "*He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.*" Then tax collectors also came to be baptised, and said to him, "*Teacher, what shall we do?*" And he said to them, "*Collect no more than what is appointed for you.*" Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "*And what shall we do?*" So he said to them, "*Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.*"

10] This is relevant to us, I think, in the context of our parish life. I advise the faithful, and all newly received into Orthodox Christianity, not go too frequently to confession. Ideally, I would say no more than three to four times a year, under normal circumstances. It is different in the monastic life, under obedience to a spiritual father, a pneumatikos, a starets. The danger is that what we imagine to be repentance merely becomes repeated behaviour, a mere perfunctory and ritualised action that one goes through, imagining that it allows us admittance to holy communion. The purpose of the mystery of confession is to re-establish our baptismal purity, to reconcile us in the body of Christ; to sanctify and to change! And to change means an ascetic struggle, an aligning of our will with the will of God. It is these struggles, these failings, this falling short, that we bring to confession through which we receive the grace of God. And with the grace of God we can be changed. But it takes time and it takes patience and humility.

11] We must be on our guard too, against those forms of Christianity that expect only conversion, that sell cheap grace. They have already sold out to the mores of this age, 'calling out' their own nostrums as sins, which they medicalise as phobias, whilst tearing down the landmarks of the past, the eternal verities. May I remind you that the one caught in adultery in St John's gospel was not told by Christ that she had not sinned, but to go her way and sin no more. or as he said to the man that he healed at the sheep pool at Bethesda, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon *you*." [Jn.5:13]

12] The early Christians refused to accept as candidates for baptism certain types of people, if they remained in their former way of life. In our day these scruples would normally be irrelevant, but actors were refused, for their wandering

and very louche way of life; tavern keepers, whose premises in the ancient world were actually houses of ill-repute, shall we say. And of course, serving soldiers, for they shed blood. Think of all those military saints, martyred, often baptised in their own blood, after they had converted to Christ and refused to worship the emperor. To this day, according to the Holy Canons, Orthodox who shed blood, even as the lesser of two evils, are under a ban for a time, until they are re-admitted to receive the Holy Gifts.

13] So, we have arrived at the Triodion, the service book that takes us up to Pascha. We are converted already, for we know Christ, the Orthodox Christ, Son of the Living God. But let us move on: acquiring more and more, the mind of Christ, the repentant mind; the mind that is turned around, not just fixated on our memories but looking forward with longing to our redemption, and our place in the kingdom of heaven. Yet this is also the season to change, a time of changing through the grace of the holy mysteries and by the work of ascetic struggle, that by Pascha we may have advanced a little further along the Way.