

Sermon 27 October 2013  
Ps 65 Luke 18:9-16 'No Distance Too Great'

Prayer: God, thank you for making us who we are – unique and unified. With your grace may we grow in mercy to heal the separations between us, our world and you. Amen.

No Distance too great – for God, I think are the words missing from our given title! No distance is too great for God to cover when listening to, listening out for His creation. The cartoon strip in our newsletter from the 'Lamb of God' = Anus Dei is highlighting for me, a fragment of the dilemma we have when we start to reflect on the listening coverage God offers us and our world.

In our humanity we want to know that **God screens** who is offered personal 'face-time', personal answering mode, one-on-one contact time... and not just that he screens – but that he screens out who *we think* he should. And to have to accept that God **doesn't** screen his calls is at times, hard to believe!

The cartoonist adds the comment: "But God does have caller ID, you can count on that" speaks into our title: "no distance is too great" *for God*. I want to add: 'no distance is too great' whatever the cause because God knows who it is that is calling – and from where!

We create the distance; it's like the saying 'If you don't feel close to God – guess who moved?' The psalmist and Jesus both tell us today, that God wants us close. God never moves 'out of range', but we do – and the Church 'word' that covers this moving away from God is 'sin'. Corny but true: the 'I' is in the middle of sin.

Some of our teaching today touches on what is mainline church! In the teachings of the faith we recognise that there is a separation between us and God because of us, and not because of God. For whatever reason, fact, ideal, or emotion ... we have stopped living God's way – the right way. The psalmist writes of being overwhelmed by iniquity – by sin.

I offer 2 comments: 1. there are strands within the Christian faith family that stress this necessity almost to the exclusion of anything else, that approach is not biblically balanced and in my opinion un-Christian. 2. The Tax Collector in Jesus parable and the psalmist understand each other: sin overwhelms, if left untouched by the grace and mercy of God.

Jesus said the man went home justified and the psalmist wrote that our acts of rebellion / sins are atoned / forgiven – the language of both says God has already acted to close the gap. The very second we acknowledge the distance and recognise our need to close the gap from our end: God says 'done'. There is no distance between us; 'we' are restored into a right relationship again.

Then comes a highlight for today – restoration into right relationship with God means we can worship. Worship happens because the gap between us and our God has been closed by our God, who always hears our prayer; answers our cries; fills us with joy; surrounds us with abundant life and exalts us.

The psalm is overflowing with how praise is not only offered by us, in our humanity with our words and actions; our lives lived in God's ways, **but** also offered by the earth. Mountains, seas, fields .... Who all shout for joy, in triumph and sing to the Lord.

This is a not so gentle reminder we may not separate ourselves from our earth – the concerns of the earth are our concerns, what happens to the earth – happens to us. We have a common Creator / father who is in a living relationship and seeks to draw us close, into His court / his temple – his church because that's where we belong, that's home. That's where we find our true selves, Jesus tells us.

Jesus places this teaching within the confines of the temple – so for us within church. That's where with honest self- knowledge and truthful reflection God finds us. And Jesus warns: where we are not honest; determined not to seek God; keeping the gap wide – **we will not be found**. Using a modern analogy – we will not be found because **we've turned** the phone off. God can activate the homing device as much as he wants, but we've silenced it from our end – because of our sin / rebellion.

Because it's all about "me" – listen to how Jesus told the story: **10** "Two men went up to the temple complex to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11** The Pharisee took his stand and was praying like this: 'God, I thank You that I'm not like other people -greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.**12** I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.'

Jesus doesn't enter the debate about whether his Pharisee is right or not in his claims of lawful obedience to the laws. Unfortunately over the years this particular story of Jesus has given Pharisee's a lot of bad press! What Jesus is teaching about is the attitude to others that is stopping the Pharisee enter – re-enter a right relationship with God – and worship.

Worship is not only that "I" obey the law; it is also about living in relationship with God **and** neighbour. So when we come to worship we are not telling God how it is – but offering ourselves to a 'Holy audit' process of all that we **are; do; how we do it and allowing God** to put us right, straighten us up and send us out. cV

Going back to my 'Holy Sheep' cartoon and our dilemma about wanting to control who God talks to, wanting God to screen calls from – from who??? The way Jesus portrays his Pharisee character, clearly God **must** screen calls from: all the greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, tax collectors, non-fasters, and non-givers of the 1/10<sup>th</sup> tithe rule... *translated* means this list covers just about everyone.... Flip the argument over and God can only answer the Pharisee's call. BUT the psalmist said: God hears and always answers the prayers of those who come to Him. Jesus says – the Pharisee is '**wrong**'. Cv

At the heart of the parable is a warning about the dangers of self-righteousness, self-pride, (the kind of public blowing of a personal 'horn') and only defining 'self' because of what others might or might not do. The parable is **equally** about how there is life to be found when we evaluate ourselves clearly, soberly and with humility enough to recognise our brokenness, **without comparison** to anyone else. It's about the relationship of the individual and an **always waiting, listening** God.

It says God does not value the same criteria as we do, such as gender, worthiness, age, social status, or perceived worth. Before God, all of us and **each of us** in our own way stand just as eligible as anyone else of God's generosity, love and forgiveness, which is always more abundant (77 x 7) than anything we can ever give God. *"Therefore (SacraconversaZione) humility dismantles our vanities and prepares us for relationship with God and others, as this distinctive story told by Jesus in Luke makes clear."*

**Humility dismantles our vanity** – *particularly* this parable teaches, **if** we have been indulging ourselves by holding to a stance of finding our self- respect **only** when we 'beat' others; run them down; find a 'group' identity by a chorus of condemnation of others...(Loader) Jesus message today is clear, bolstering our sense of identity by disparaging others (even when they are **terrible sinners**) so easily leads to illusions of grandeur and a failure to see ourselves in healthy, honest ways, sprinkled with a good dose of humility!

Our real value is in loving and accepting ourselves as God loves us and not upping our value by downing others; in being able to know ourselves – as sinners before God; trusting God to bridge the distance; restore the relationship and send us home – justified – made right – ready to offer true worship and praise, able to sing and know our lives have been touched by the joy of the presence of the Lord. There is no distance too great for God to bridge, ever. Amen