

## Me, you and God

As we read the Gospels each week, and listen to the deeds of Jesus; the teachings, the parables, the healings, we begin to realise something fundamental. We come to recognise that an area of our lives which Jesus wants to explore with us essentially boils down to 'relationship' and in particular the centrality of our relationship with God and how understanding this feeds our relationships with each other. What begins to unfold is the fact that both are very much part and parcel of the same thing. In fact they are so inter-twined that to try and think we can keep them separate is mistaken. What happens when we look at ourselves and our relationship with God is that we are drawn into the extraordinary conclusion that if our relationships with each other become damaged then so does our relationship with God. To understand why this is so, we must constantly return to the heart of where our relationship with God and with each other is formed and from where it is fed.

In his prayer, the Pharisee is totally self absorbed. Every petition he makes begins with "I". It is as if his own personality is all he can contemplate. There is no room in his thought for his neighbour, no room in his heart for the plight of anyone else and he sees this self obsession as the fruit of his relationship with God. All he seeks is his own vainglory warped as it by his sense of extraordinary pride in his achievements. He sees what he does and how he acts as the very embodiment of all that is best about his status and position. He believes that his relationship with God is sound and well founded, and that so long as he keeps to the rules, he'll get his reward. The publican on the other hand has no such sentiment; his prayer is an admission of that. Yet his prayer underscores what he knows to be the truth about himself and it displays his yearning that this knowledge be re-ordered. This is what Jesus himself refers to when he reminds the Pharisees of what the Prophet Hosea said: *Go and learn the meaning of the words; 'mercy is what pleases me not sacrifice'*. So the publican's request for mercy in acknowledgement of his honesty about himself, opens up the pathway to relationship, whereas the Pharisee, in seeking only an endorsement for what he has become, closes off any desire for relationship.

My mind at this point goes back to the incident in Luke's gospel, when at the outset of his ministry Jesus calls Peter. It is in the moment following the miracle of the great draft of fish that Peter witnessing what has happened says: *Leave me Lord; I am a sinful man*. There is that honesty again, that openness that recognises how much we are in need of God to enter into a relationship with us. This is the essential element that Jesus now recognises, and he tells Peter that he is not to be afraid, for *from now it is people you will be catching*. In other words, Peter's relationships will now be forged and modelled through his understanding of his relationship with Jesus and just what that means for him.

Our relationship with God must be open to this honesty too, so that we can experience that same sense of purpose. It is a transforming moment, one which teaches us the real meaning of humility and exaltation because of what we receive and are called upon to give. We know it is the only way, and even if like Peter we are afraid, we are still called.

*They were at supper and Jesus got up from the table and removed his outer garments...* We know the rest of the story; it is from here that our relationships are fed.