1 March 2020: Choral Matins
The First Sunday of Lent
The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean

‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector.’

In nomine…

Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.
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In the eastern Christian Church that prayer is known as the Jesus Prayer. Among our Orthodox brothers and sisters, it’s the best known of all prayers after the Our Father. ‘Pray without ceasing’, enjoins Saint Paul in the first letter to the Thessalonians and the Jesus Prayer arose in the early days of Christian monastic life as an attempt to take those words seriously. The idea is to recite it repeatedly, until it becomes as natural as breathing. Those who pray it regularly often find that the prayer becomes almost self-perpetuating: it begins to say itself. ‘Early one morning the prayer woke me up’, a Russian pilgrim once said!

In the Church of England, we tend to be suspicious of the repetitions of this type of prayer. After all, Jesus in Matthew’s gospel seems to be quite unequivocal: ‘when ye pray, use not vain repetitions as the heathen do’. But the words of Jesus translated in the Authorized Version as ‘vain repetitions’ are actually concerned not with repetition but with excessive complexity and length. ‘Inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity’ was Disraeli’s phrase about Gladstone. And that is what Jesus is getting at. We shouldn’t be swept away by our own rhetoric. ‘When you are praying’, Jesus says, ‘do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him’ (Mt. 6: 7-8)
In today’s second reading we heard another piece of Jesus’s teaching on prayer: the parable he tells of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Temple. “The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income’”. As so often, Jesus is exaggerating here. He draws a caricature and, like the work of a skilled cartoonist, it is a caricature that lays bare the truth. I don’t suppose that any of us has actually prayed using the Pharisee’s words; but self-righteous thoughts? – I expect we’ve had a few… Every time we look at our conduct and compare it favourably with those around us, we are standing alongside the Pharisee.

The Pharisee’s fault is that he presumes on God’s mercy. The tax collector, by contrast, presumes nothing. The Pharisee has stationed himself in a prominent place, a place appropriate to his prestige; but the tax collector, we are told, stands far off, hiding himself inconspicuously in a corner. He will not look up to heaven, but beats his breast, and says ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner’. The Pharisee has set out the stall of his merits before God – ‘I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income’; the tax collector says nothing at all about himself, except that he is a sinner.

‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner’. The Pharisee’s words are just a condensed version of the Jesus Prayer: ‘Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner’. Both prayers remind us clearly of what all prayer is, an act of communication between us sinners and the sinlessness of God. The gulf between God and us is unbridgeably wide; but it is also no gulf at all because, between our sin and God’s sinlessness, is set the wonderful mercy of God shown in Christ, through whom all our prayer is made.

Most of us, most of the time get prayer wrong. Time and again we fall back into a debased understanding of prayer as a kind of shopping list:

‘I’m feeling awful today, Lord, please help me get through’
‘There’s so much needless violence in the world, Lord, please step in’
‘My best friend is about to do something very stupid, please give me the words to stop her’.

These are all urgent and pressing needs, each of them crying out for God’s help. But our prayer shouldn’t begin there: these prayers for help that are wrung from us by the horrors of life are entirely legitimate and God hears them. But they can only be spoken and can only be heard, because of the mercy of God in Christ. And that mercy is a reality we can apprehend through the kind of sustained, still submission that we find in the Jesus
prayer. Whatever our mood, whatever our need, it is always the loving mercy of God that is the answer.

*We adore you, O God… have mercy*

*We confess to you, O God… have mercy*

*We give you thanks, O God… have mercy*

*We ask you, O God… have mercy*

*We need you, O God… have mercy*

Many religious traditions place great emphasis on the mercy of God. In the Jewish Talmud, for instance, it is written that God’s mercy requires us too to be merciful: ‘Because God is forgiving and merciful, be thou also forgiving and merciful’. And in the Koran, each chapter begins with the repeated phrase: ‘In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful’. But it is in the Christian faith, founded upon the mercy of God in Christ, that God’s forgiveness is most central.

The instances of mercy in the gospels are famous and too numerous to mention, but a story from the sayings off the Desert Fathers, dating from about the fifth century, is perhaps less well known:

In one of the desert monasteries a monk was found to have committed a sin. A meeting was called to discipline him and the oldest of the monks was called upon to pronounce judgement. But when he was summoned he refused to come. A party was sent to fetch him. So finally he got up and set off, but, before he did so, he took a leaky jug and filled it with water and took it with him. The others came out to meet him and said, ‘What is this jug you have with you, Father?’ The old man said to them, ‘My sins run out behind me and I cannot see them, yet here am I coming to sit in judgement on the mistakes of somebody else.’ When they heard this, they called off the meeting.

It goes without saying that human nature has not altered since the fifth century. Somebody does something wrong, so what do we do about it? Call a meeting, set up a committee. Of course, meetings and committees are necessary, but the moral of the story, surely, is that in a sinful world we sinners are not always the best judges of one another’s sins. All of us, like the elderly monk, must confess, ‘I too am a sinner’ and pray, ‘Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner’.

When the Pharisee in this morning’s second lesson stands in the temple he approaches the law as one who has mastered it. He has passed all tests with flying colours and has the
gown, the hood and the grade point average to prove it. The Pharisee reads the law confident that he has acquired all the skills he needs to do so wisely and well. The tax collector couldn’t be more different. He doesn’t read the law: he lets himself be read by it. It doesn’t occur to him to think of the law of God as a subject one could study, let alone excel in. For him, the law is simply what stands between human beings and God, and his prayer, literally, is to be covered by it: ‘He shall cover thee under his wings and thou shalt be safe under his feathers’, as the psalmist puts it (91:4).

To pray thus is simply to offer all of our life – good and bad; noble and fallible; half-baked, well-intentioned or just plain pathetic – to lay it all before God and to plead for mercy in Christ. As the great mediaeval prayer, the Anima Christi puts it:

Deep in thy wounds, Lord, hide and shelter me,
So shall I never, never part from thee.

_Kyrie eleison_, Lord, have mercy, is our prayer. Repeated not because it changes God’s mind, but because it changes our hearts:

_Lord, have mercy upon us._
_Lord, have mercy upon us._
_Lord, have mercy upon us._

In nomine…