

St Paul's Church, Spennymoor

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Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

The passage we have just heard read is the beginning of an extended reflection on a very provocative aspect of the ministry of Our Lord: his welcoming of tax collectors and other notorious sinners.

In the first two verses, we are given some context to what Christ is about to say in the parable which forms the bulk of today's Gospel lesson: the gathering of tax collectors and sinners and the response of the Pharisees and the scribes (or 'teachers of the law' as the NIV puts it).

The parable we have just heard is introduced in the third verse and is the first of three parables in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. All of these parables have similar, although not identical, themes. I will not dwell on the other parables for now but if you are interested they are the parables of the Lost Coin and that of the Lost Son. If you are familiar with them, you will know how they are similar to and differ from today's parable of the Lost Sheep; if you are not, I am sure the common titles for the parables give away much of the similarity.

The parable beginning in the third verse is, I think, a relatively well-known and well-beloved passage. In understanding it more deeply, I think some context may be helpful:

Jewish society at the time of Christ was divided into three major schools of thought. Firstly, we have the Sadducees, who rejected the immortality of the soul and seem to have been intimately connected to the Jewish priesthood and the temple sacrifices. Secondly, the Essenes were a mystic movement of which not much is known for certain. It is however thought that many early converts to Christianity may have been Essenes; a connection to the Dead Sea Scrolls has also been proposed but I should stress that this is all conjecture and by no means the only view of them.

Both the Sadducees and the Essenes seem to have disappeared not long after the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70. In the case of the Sadducees, likely due to their strong connection to the Temple rendering them essentially irrelevant. The fate of the Essenes, like most things about them is unknown. It seems likely that some members of both groups converted to Christianity or were subsumed into the remaining school of thought: the Pharisees.

It seems, both from the New Testament and from extrabiblical historic sources, that the

Pharisees were the dominant movement within Second Temple Judaism and after the destruction of the Temple, it is virtually certain that the Pharisees were the main driving force in the development of what would become Rabbinic Judaism (this is what we would know as Judaism today and I want to emphasise that this form of Judaism is very different to Second Temple Judaism, to the point of being an entirely new religion, not least due to the aforementioned destruction of the Temple and consequent inability to perform the sacrifices of the Old Covenant). The Pharisees, in contrast to the Sadducees, saw the other parts of the Law of Moses as much more important than the sacrificial system; they were also much more accepting of prophets (some extreme Sadducees may have only accepted the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) as authoritative, but the Pharisees accepted everything that we now know as the Old Testament. I am deliberately ignoring the Apocrypha, which, although definitely not inspired like the canonical books, have a very interesting place in Christianity, and particularly within Anglicanism (I am already going on enough of a tangent so will not jump further into that rabbit hole). Their focus on the law and the prophets over the sacrificial system would have had to been essential when those Jews (many of whom were likely Pharisees) who rejected Christ developed Rabbinic Judaism.

I could go on about the relationship between Second Temple Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism, but I will now instead consider briefly the relationship between Second Temple Judaism and its true successor: Christianity. In order to do this effectively, an overview of the different Covenants made between God and mankind will be useful. I should probably warn you that Covenant Theology, as this framework is called, is a particular interest of mine so I might talk too much about it. I will try to keep this overview as brief as possible and I promise that I will, at least somewhat, tie this back to the rest of today's reading.

Before we can talk about the Covenants, I should probably explain the idea of federal headship (not to be confused with male headship in complementarian theology, which is not the topic of this sermon). Federal headship is a term applied to Adam: Adam is the representative (or federal head) of all mankind; because of Adam's sin, we, as his descendants, are all also guilty of sin, because he was our representative. This may be difficult to hear but it is only the first half of the story. Just as Adam was our first federal head, there is another federal head, the Second or Final Adam, that is to say Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Sin came into the world through the disobedience of Adam but defeated once and for all through the active and perfect obedience of Christ (see Romans 5:12-21), who died as a representative and substitute of mankind, voluntarily taking upon himself the absolutely deserved punishment due to mankind.

After that brief aside within what is technically also an aside, let us get back to Covenants. There are three fundamental Covenants made by God:

1. The Covenant of Redemption: this is the eternal agreement within the Triune God-head whereby God the Father decreed that God the Son should become incarnate through the operation of God the Holy Spirit and that the Son should then suffer and die as a federal head of mankind to make a full, perfect, and sufficient atonement for our sin. Within this Covenant, the Father also promises to raise Christ from the dead, glorify Him, and give Him a people (we, as Christians, are that people)

2. The Covenant of Works: this title may sound unusual: after all, salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, not through works. This is however not the Covenant by which we are saved (in fact, it is almost the opposite). This covenant was made in the Garden of Eden between God and Adam, again as the federal head of all mankind. God promised a perfect and everlasting life if Adam would follow God's single commandment (not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil). As I am sure many of you already know, Adam broke this commandment and thus the Covenant of Works, standing condemned as representative of all mankind. This Covenant is explicitly identified as a Covenant in the Bible, not in Genesis but in Hosea 6:7: 'As at Adam, they have broken the covenant; they were unfaithful to me there.'
3. The Covenant of Grace: this is the Covenant between God and the Christian faithful by which we are saved. Under this Covenant, God promises eternal life to all those who have faith in Christ. He also promises to send the Holy Spirit to those He has chosen (the elect) to give us the will and the ability to believe. Christ is here the federal head and substitute of His faithful; He fulfills the Covenant of Works on our behalf, both positively by being completely righteous and negatively by taking upon Himself the consequences of our sin. This Covenant runs throughout the Bible and is subdivided into several subordinate Covenants, from that made with Noah to that made with and through Christ. It is also the expression in the world of the eternal Covenant of Redemption within the Most Holy Trinity.

I have now spoken for probably far too long about Covenant Theology. To be entirely honest with you, when I was writing this sermon, I got a bit excited about this and lost track of the length of what was meant to be a brief aside but is now virtually the entire sermon. I did promise to make at least some connection to the parable we have heard today. That connection is the following, probably somewhat contrived, example:

Through the sin of Adam and breach of the Covenant of Works, we are all lost. Believers are God's flock and Christ is our shepherd. God comes to seek us out and carries us back into His fold by giving us the gift of faith in order that we may be included in the Covenant of Grace. By doing this God fulfills His eternal Covenant of Redemption. To round off this preachment, I would like to recall the words of a famous hymn: 'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me'.

Amen.