

I must admit I sometimes struggle with the way in which Jesus condemned the Pharisees as he did in this morning's gospel. Over the years I've heard too many sermons – some preached by yours truly – which say, in effect, that God is more concerned with those outside the church than with those of us who go. The same problem arises with the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd doesn't seem to worry about the faithful 99, his only concern is with the one naughty sheep who's run off. And I guess you could say the same about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The father in the story has a loyal, reliable son, but all our focus in the parable is on the son who has gone off wasting his dad's money. No wonder the elder son is browned off when his errant brother rolls up and is welcomed with a big party with the poor old fatted calf getting it in the neck. Literally. Sometimes, I have to admit, I feel more like a pharisee, or one of the 99, or a stay-at-home elder brother than do a sinful tax collector, a wayward sheep or a profligate son. What is more I'd have to say that although part of my ministry has been to the lost and wayward, most of my career as a priest has been in support of those who belong to the church, the faithful and the loyal. Like most priests I spent my time sustaining my church congregations, preparing and presenting what I hope was edifying and uplifting liturgy, preaching and teaching about the faith, visiting and spending time with members, building up the life of the church community through social events and ensuring the smooth running of the institution. Again, like most priests, I spent a fair amount of time with young people connected with the church, either in church schools or in the children's and young people's organisations we ran. I would have to admit that my outreach to the lost sheep and the prodigal was a relatively small part of my ministry and mission. That is not true of all priests, of course, there are some really heroic ones who devote most of their ministry to such work. But they do not make up the majority. Nor is such ministry the main church activity of most lay people I know, though again many lay people do a great deal for those outside or on the fringes of the Church.

When I turn to consider myself, I would place myself somewhere in between a self-righteous pharisee and a grovelling sinner. Perhaps that's true of most of us. I certainly feel positive about being a church member; I feel I am doing the right thing by going to church and praying regularly; I feel that it is right to give to the church and the charities I support and that maybe I am more generous than most people. I believe I do my fair share of good works. On the other hand I hope I don't look down my nose at other people in a judgemental way like the pharisee Jesus spoke about. His great failing was the sin of pride which theologians have always regarded as **the** great sin. C.S. Lewis, for example, described pride as 'the utmost evil' and argues that 'pride leads to every other vice [and] ... has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began.' I am sometimes surprised, therefore, at the amount of times we use the word 'pride' or 'proud' positively. 'I am proud of myself', we say, or, 'I am proud of my achievements'; 'you should take a pride in your appearance'. I think we should use these words very sparingly in the awareness that pride is the root sin of all the rest. I do, however, appreciate that for some, the LGBT+ community, for instance, there is an absolute need to recover a sense of pride. It is also the case of course that, so far as our faith is concerned, we need to have confidence that the way we live out our Christian lives has some merit. We need to feel we are on the right track, more or less, or we would gain no satisfaction from following the way of Jesus. We also need to have confidence and positivity about the religion we profess for why otherwise would we profess it? But this is completely different to the self-satisfied pride exhibited by the pharisee in the parable who, as the evangelist puts it, trusted in himself that he was righteous. Any confidence we have should come from God and the righteousness he imparts to us. assert

So far as being a sinner is concerned, well yes, I'm willing to admit I am one. Don't we all say so in the confession every week? But sometimes the church lays it on too thick. All that 'miserable sinners' stuff! So, OK, we're all sinners, but let's not go on about it too much! Because there

are dangers in overdoing the sin stuff. One problem with overdoing sin is spelt out in narrative form in a remarkable book I recently read called *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner* written by the Scottish author James Hogg in 1824. It is a powerful attack on an extreme form of Protestantism found in some Christian traditions. In it the principal character is so profoundly certain of his justification that he feels free to commit numerous heinous crimes. He is sure that he is among the elect, among those who are bound for heaven because he has had the sensation of being saved, that he feels at liberty to behave in whatever way he chooses. This attitude is sometimes traced back to the Reformer Martin Luther who once said ‘sin boldly’ because no sin can separate the elect from Christ. I believe this is a dangerous distortion of the gospel. It is good that the sinful tax-collector went away from the Temple justified, but it is also to be hoped that he sought to live a more virtuous life afterwards. I’ve also come across the idea that it is alright to commit sins because one can always confess them to a priest afterwards and be absolved. Surely nothing is further from the real purpose of confession which is to remove our guilt and set us on a better path henceforth.

And talking of guilt, another problem with banging on about sin is that it can create dreadful feelings of guilt. You hear people speak about ‘Catholic’ guilt or Jewish ‘guilt because of the way in which religion can inculcate a deep sense of guilt and a lack of self-esteem. I’m sure some people suffer from Anglican guilt too! Actually, I think that going on about sin all the time can make the church seem ridiculous. I’m reminded of the story of a church where the vicar thought he was being very clever when he put up a wayside pulpit poster reading ‘If you’re tired on sin, step in’, to which some wag had added underneath, ‘But if not, phone 62574’!

So what is the middle way between vaunting pride and grovelling humility, between the likes of Mr Darcy and Uriah Heap? It is clear that Christians should eschew the vice of pride. But the wrong kind of humility is also to be avoided. A keen awareness of one's own sinfulness

and the resulting need for God's grace can be a good thing, but not if it leads to the abandonment of virtue or to an overwhelming and debilitating sense of guilt. What lies between pride and humility in my view is self-awareness alongside the knowledge that we depend upon God to assist us in treading the paths of righteousness. Self-awareness is vitally important because it is all too easy to delude ourselves about what kind of person we are. I have recently been reading a book about George Orwell, the author of *Animal Farm* and *1984*. In it the writer shows that Orwell deluded himself about his treatment of his first wife Eileen and indeed many other people. An author who in other ways was acutely aware of the world around him was profoundly lacking in self-awareness. How do we cultivate it? We need to reflect on our thoughts, feelings and actions, including the way we impact upon other people. To help us do this we may need to obtain feedback from trusted friends and colleagues. It is to be hoped that by doing so we may come to a deeper understanding of ourselves, our thoughts and actions. Self-awareness should not detract from self-esteem which is quite different from pride and is necessary to live out a fulfilled life.

Alongside self-awareness reliance on God is a vital attitude for a Christian. A key element in the Catholic Christian understanding of character is a belief that God will help us to grow in holiness, which basically means that he will help us to be morally good men and women. Being a Christian is not just about having faith, it is also about seeking to live as God wants us to. But the good news is that he doesn't just leave it to us, he aids and supports us to walk in the way of the Lord Jesus Christ, the way of holiness. Our part is to seek that help by worship, prayer and by reflection on the life of Our Lord and those who have trod his way throughout history. These two elements together, self-awareness and dependence on God are, I believe, the right attitudes we need to reach maturity in our Christian lives. They will create within us a positivity which is not pride and a humility which is not servility but a confidence that we are the noble and beloved children of God, the brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ.