

When I was received into the Church of England I was given this little book: *Ponder these things*, by Rowan Williams. (A surprisingly short book, of meditations based around Orthodox icons.)

I said at the time that I thought it would be one of those books that would turn out to be just the right thing at the right time. That time came recently. I finally read it about a month ago, only 9 years later, on a day when I really needed something like this. Particularly towards the end I found some really striking passages.

One of them has to do with the prayer of the Church. Rowan Williams talks about how the strength of the Church 'certainly will' come from prayer, or, in his words, 'the praying agency of Christ'. *But* (and this seems particularly relevant today):

'we are not all that likely to be able to identify where [that prayer is] to be found. When, occasionally, we have a glimpse, we may be very surprised indeed. What if the life that fuels the Church through prayer is not the routine prayer of the worshipping community, not even the prayer of the religious orders, but moments of exposure and insight, or of desperately needy openness to God on the part of very irregular Christians? Isn't this actually what Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector might suggest? What if the Church really lives from the prayer and experience of those it least values in its public talk?'

(Incidentally, I doubt that it's a case of 'either/or', but I imagine that it's more of a resounding 'both/and'.)

Today we're on the second week of our sermon series on the Beatitudes, and we're looking at the first of them: 'blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

Trying to define what 'poor in spirit' means and therefore who is included quickly starts to run into problems. If, however, we instead look for stories about Jesus reaching out to people who might be called 'poor in spirit', we could be here all day. Our gospel reading was one of them. The quote from Rowan Williams mentions another – the Tax Collector. I challenge you to come up with others.

Sometimes in these stories we'll be talking about the actually poor, but not always – as in the case of the Tax Collector, whose job would have made him wealthy. But the Pharisee certainly considers him poor in spirit. The Tax Collector's lifestyle is judged and condemned by those who are convinced that they know what makes someone right with God.

The Pharisee's judgement is wrong, of course, and it's not for him to judge. But when we think about ourselves, underneath it all, even when we put up a lot of front we probably most of us feel ourselves judged and found wanting, or have judged ourselves and found

ourselves wanting, in all sorts of ways: spiritual, physical, material, social. Probably *especially* when we put up a lot of front, in fact, so I wonder what was really going on with the Pharisee. The good news is that our inadequacy is no bar. It is in fact blessed. God blesses the poor in spirit. God is merciful. God is loving. God promises his kingdom to such as these. *We can* feel safe and secure in God's love.

But today's gospel also gently reminds us something else. There *is* still a condition attached to God's blessing and mercy towards us. In today's gospel, Jesus explains to Simon that this woman in the story has been forgiven much, and therefore loves Jesus much. Jesus talks about servants being forgiven their debts. Sometimes he uses the same idea in a harsher way, to emphasise the consequences of being unmerciful when we have been shown mercy. If we are to remain poor in spirit, open to God, dependent upon him, we can never judge: we must show that same mercy to others.

Phil Blackburn, who put this sermon series together, put this quote in his notes for this week, from Rob Bell: 'The moment we look down upon somebody because they aren't as disciplined, hard working, upright, smart, responsible, moral, God fearing, Bible believing or Jesus trusting as we are, because they've made idiotic, stupid, immoral choices again and again and again – at that

moment we are in fact rich in spirit and Jesus isn't announcing anything to us'.

Now, most of us probably grasp this idea about mercy and not judging, and why this is important, to some extent. It's an idea that's pretty central to Christianity, after all. But of course if it stays just an idea, we've missed the point. Being a Christian isn't theoretical. It's about *enacting* our beliefs, living them day to day. So we need to ask ourselves: how much does this idea *show* in our lives, as individuals, and as a Church? How much do people we meet experience God's blessing and mercy through us, without feeling judged? Are our daily lives lived in solidarity with the many, many other children of God who cry out to God for blessing and mercy? And are we able to receive all of this from those other children of God we meet – who just might be the ones Rowan Williams talks about, out of the strength of whose prayer the whole church lives?

Where there at least starts to be a yes to all these questions, any distinction between 'us' and 'them' begins simply to fade away. We are *all* given the freedom to be completely honest about who we are and where we are with God, and we start to be able to see the world through God's eyes. Then God's kingdom, the kingdom of the poor in spirit, can start to break through.