

OCTOBER 28

READINGS: Luke 18:9-14; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18 Jeremiah 14:7-10,19-22; Psalm 84:1-7

SERMON A

To us the Pharisees are the villains, but it is important to realise that in the time of Jesus they were the heroes. These were the people who took their Bible with the greatest possible seriousness, and who were determined to do God's will in every area of life. They had worked out that there were 613 divine commands in the Scriptures, and they discussed endlessly how these should be obeyed. If anyone was going to be saved, surely it was them! But as for the tax collector, considered a traitor to his people and nation, a collaborator with the Gentile oppressors, there was surely no hope for him! But Jesus turns people's expectations upside down. In this story that he tells, there is no doubting the Pharisee's dedication or his sincerity. But somehow there is something seriously wrong. His main concern is to compare himself (favourably, of course) with others. Moreover, he has no sense at all of having fallen short of what God required of him. In contrast, the tax collector is all too aware of his sins. He has no thought for what others may think of him, beating his breast. His one concern is that God might have mercy on him. Jesus says that it is this man whom God the judge will declare to be righteous!

The apostle Paul looks forward to a 'crown of righteousness' from the Lord. So is he like the Pharisee? No. For Paul knows that his righteous standing before God depends not on his own good deeds or obedience to God's law, but depends solely on God's unmerited favour and what Christ has achieved for sinners by his sacrificial death and victorious resurrection. Like the writer of Psalm 84, his strength is in God as he walks the pilgrim way. He gives the glory to God, and does not boast about his own achievements as the Pharisee does. He knows that it is those who are 'confident of their own righteousness and look down on everybody else' (Luke 18:9) whom God is unwilling to accept.

SERMON B

In the reading from 2 Timothy, the Christian life is likened to a race and we Christians to runners in it. As runners in this race, we are called to live for God with what God has given us and not try to be someone we're not, acting the part; as runners in this race, we are called to rigorous training – spending quality time with Jesus in prayer, spending quality time in digging deeply into the Bible, spending quality time in contemplating in awe and wonder what Jesus has gone through for us, spending quality time in growing in trust and love for Jesus – and how essential this rigorous training of prayer, Bible study, contemplation, deepening trust is, for this race can be long and tough – and there's no room for cheating or resting, and there's no one else who will run for us. For a runner there is a pain barrier to get through, and for Christians the going can sometimes be tough and draining and, yes, painful. But God will always be there for us, giving us the help and strength we need to stay in the race, and in the Christian race there is a prize for every runner, not just a medal for the fastest.

As Christians, we should also try to encourage one another – we never run alone – and we should also remind ourselves of the large crowd of witnesses, those who have run the straight race before us, who are there cheering us on

For a truly dedicated runner, then, there is no cheating, and a truly dedicated runner knows you can't just win by looking good or knowing the right things – they need the physical strength which come from hours of training to reach the finishing line.

It's bit like that for us who have decided that we want to 'run as Christians'. We will need strength if we are to stay in the race to the end – and remember we have to take care of ourselves – but the strength we need for the race of the Christian life is the strength that comes from God and from him alone. We can't reach the finishing line without him.