Edenham ①

Friends, on this quiet day as we reflect on vocation within the life of the Church of England, we are given this searching parable from Saint Luke: the Pharisee and the tax collector, standing side by side in the Temple, praying.

It is a deceptively simple story. Two figures. Two prayers. One verdict.

And as Warden of Lay Ministry, I cannot read this passage without hearing in it the pulse of vocation — the question of who we believe ourselves to be before God, and therefore what we imagine our offering to God might be.

Luke tells us that Jesus addressed this parable

to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

That small phrase is like a key that unlocks the whole scene. The issue is not piety. It is not discipline. It is not theological precision. It is trust — and its direction.

The Pharisee trusts in himself.

The tax collector throws himself upon God.

And it is the latter who goes home justified.

The Pharisee stands apart — spatially, morally, spiritually.

"God, I thank you that I am not like other people…"

It is a prayer of comparison.

Now we must be careful. The Pharisee is not a cartoon villain.

He fasts.

He tithes.

He lives with discipline.

These are not failings; **they are signs of seriousness about God.**

In fact, within the tradition of Israel, such practices were marks of covenant faithfulness.

The tragedy is not that he does too much, but that he imagines his faithfulness places God in his debt.

His prayer is not really addressed to God at all. It is a performance of self-description.

And here is where this text begins to press gently but firmly upon those of us discerning and living vocation.

It is possible — even in the Church — to confuse vocation with spiritual achievement. To imagine that the more competent we become, the more indispensable we are. To build an identity on usefulness.

For lay and ordained ministers— and I include myself here — there can be a temptation to construct a résumé before God.

To catalogue the hours served, the liturgies led, the pastoral conversations held, the safeguarding training completed, the theological reading undertaken.

All good things.

But vocation that becomes self-justification ceases to be gift and becomes currency.

The Pharisee's problem is not that he serves; it is that he serves in order to secure a verdict about himself.

The tax collector stands far off. He will not even lift his eyes. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

In the Greek text, the plea is even more striking: **"Be propitiated toward me."**

It is temple language. Sacrificial language. He knows that if he stands at all, he stands only because mercy creates the ground beneath his feet.

There is no comparison here. No reference to another. Only a direct encounter with God's holiness and his own need.

(3)

And Jesus says that this man goes home justified.

Justified — declared in right relationship with God — not because of moral excellence, but because of trust. Trust not in himself, but in God's mercy.

This is the wellspring of Christian vocation.

Before we are ministers — lay or ordained — before we are Readers, Licensed Lay Ministers, churchwardens, pastoral visitors, intercessors, evangelists — we are those who stand in need of mercy.

The Church of England's language of vocation often speaks of discernment, calling, formation. All of that matters deeply. But beneath it all is something far simpler and far more radical: **we are called because we are loved, not because we are impressive.**

The tax collector has nothing to offer except his need.

And that is enough.

Notice where this parable takes place: in the Temple. The very heart of Israel's worship. The centre of sacrifice, prayer, and priestly ministry.

Two men go up to pray.

The Temple, then, becomes a mirror.

It reveals not simply behaviour, but posture. Not activity, but orientation.

And the Church, in every age, functions in the same way.

Our structures, our ministries, our liturgies — these are not ends in themselves. They reveal the posture of our hearts.

In a quiet day such as this, we are invited into that Temple space. To stand before God and ask: upon what am I relying?

It is possible to be very busy in ministry and yet spiritually self-reliant. It is possible to be theologically articulate and yet prayerfully distant. It is possible to champion lay vocation — as I do — and yet subtly build one's identity on competence.

(4)

But vocation in the Kingdom is never self-generated. It is always responsive..

We must also be careful not to mishear this parable as a celebration of grovelling. Christian humility is not theatrical self-deprecation. It is truthfulness.

The tax collector does not deny who he is. He names it. "**A sinner**."

Not in a general kind of a way, but personally.

This parable calls us back to simplicity. We do not need to persuade God of our worth.

Our worth is given.

The cross of Christ settles that question definitively.

As Warden of Lay Ministry, I am often privileged to walk with people at various stages of discernment. Some feel inadequate. Others feel quietly confident. Most waver between the two.

This parable reassures both groups.

To the anxious: your feelings of inadequacy do not disqualify you.

To the confident: your feelings of competence do not justify you.

All of us stand on mercy.

Jesus concludes with a reversal:

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

In Luke's Gospel, this is not an isolated theme. It echoes the Magnificat earlier in the narrative — God casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly. The Kingdom operates by inversion.

But this is not humiliation for humiliation's sake.

It is about alignment with reality.

To exalt oneself is to live an illusion — to behave as though we are self-originating. To humble oneself is simply to acknowledge the truth: we are creatures, sustained by grace.

And when that truth is embraced, something remarkable happens. We are freed for service.

The tax collector, justified, goes home. We are not told what he does next. But one imagines that a life rooted in mercy becomes a life capable of mercy.

And surely that is the heart of vocation in the Church of England today: not the preservation of structures, not even the multiplication of ministries, but the formation of communities shaped by mercy.

Communities where people do not need to prove themselves before they belong.

Communities where prayer is honest.

Communities where lay and ordained alike remember that we are first recipients, then stewards.

Permit me, if I may, to speak particularly to those exercising or discerning lay ministry.

You inhabit a space that can feel ambiguous.

Not ordained, yet authorised.

Not set apart in the same way, yet publicly recognised.

It can be tempting either to minimise your calling or to overcompensate for it.

This parable releases you from both temptations.

Your ministry does not depend upon being "better than" anyone else. Nor does it depend upon diminishing yourself.

It depends upon grace.

The Church does not authorise or license you because you are flawless. She licenses you because, through prayer and discernment, she recognises in you a responsiveness to God's call.

And that call is sustained not by comparison but by communion.

When you stand to lead intercessions, to preach, to teach, to visit, to serve at the altar, you do so not as one who has secured God's approval, but as one who has received it.

And that changes the nature of ministry entirely.

It makes it gentler.

It makes it braver.

It makes it less anxious.

There is something beautifully understated in Jesus' conclusion: the tax collector "went down to his home justified."

Justified — and no one may have noticed.

No public announcement. No visible transformation. Simply a changed standing before God.

Much of lay ministry is like that. Faithful, often unseen, sometimes misunderstood. The Kingdom grows quietly. Hearts turn silently. Prayers are whispered.

Justification itself is a quiet miracle. The reordering of a life at its deepest centre.

On this quiet day, perhaps the invitation is not first to do more, but to stand differently.

To allow God to justify us again — not in theory, but in the core of our identity.

To release the comparisons.

To relinquish the subtle contempt that can creep in — toward other traditions, other churches, other forms of ministry, even other people in our own congregations.

And simply to pray:

"God, be merciful to me."

Two men go up to the Temple.

Only one goes home justified.

The difference lies not in the quantity of their religious practice, but in the direction of their trust.

As we continue to discern and live our vocations within the Church of England, may we do so as those who know themselves to be recipients of mercy.

May our ministries flow not from anxiety or competition, but from gratitude.

And may we, like the tax collector, discover that when we entrust ourselves wholly to God's mercy, we are lifted — not into self-importance, but into the quiet dignity of grace.

Amen.