

### Case Study – Drama of Pharisees and Tax-Collectors

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#### Introduction

This case-study of devised drama as an “embodied, creative and playful making-it-up-ourselves type of scriptural interpretation” comes from Gambella, at the far western edge of Ethiopia, near the border with Sudan. I worked for a week with a group of nine priests and deacons on a project, ‘Exploring the Bible through Drama’. On several mornings the men worked/played in two groups for half-an-hour to devise a drama in response to the Gospel that we had heard at Morning Prayer. What follows is an account of a drama responding to a section of Jesus’ teaching on John the Baptist – Luke 7: 24-35.

<sup>24</sup> When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>25</sup> What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. <sup>26</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>27</sup> This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”

<sup>28</sup> I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’

<sup>29</sup> (And all the people who heard this, including the tax-collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John’s baptism. <sup>30</sup> But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves.)

<sup>31</sup> ‘To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? <sup>32</sup> They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling to one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.”

<sup>33</sup> For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, “He has a demon”; <sup>34</sup> the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!”

<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.’

After general discussion on the passage the group turned to the practical nature of their drama and they had isolated the two groups of characters who became its focus (verses 29-30), for they had noticed that ‘the same people who were with John were with Jesus’. There was a lot of laughter as they discussed how they would show the passage, and the drama was performed as a comedy, with the focus on activity rather than dialogue. The men chose to leave the specific narrative setting of the passage to the last scene, forming the first from their imaginations in dialogue with clues from elsewhere in Luke, probably the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector (18: 9-14), and the story of Zacchaeus (19: 1-10). The second scene developed intimations about John the Baptist’s ministry that are carried within Jesus’ teaching.



### Scene 1

The first scene introduced their characters. Two 'tax-collectors' sat behind a table in front of which three 'Pharisees' queued. With all the lack of hurry of bureaucracy, the tax-collectors worked together to bully the religious leaders into paying more than they had anticipated, in goods as well as in coins. The tax-collectors gleefully split their takings between themselves, setting only a small portion aside for the Romans. Apart from when being specifically addressed by the tax-collectors, the religious leaders turned away from them to engage in their own conversation. Though annoyed and frustrated by the tax-collectors the Pharisees were displayed as buoyed up by their own sense of superiority and purity that viewed the tax-collectors as beneath them, despite the fact that these men robbed them of their material wealth. The whole formed a comedy of types of fallen humanity that we all recognised from our own experience of the world and the difficulties of being human.

### Scene 2

The second scene opened with John the Baptist preaching. The contrasting characters from the previous scene now formed two small separated groups listening, but standing at a distance, from John and from each other. John's message was displayed as enticing, for the two pairs of characters moved towards him until they were gathered around him. They then sat with John the Baptist, forming one group. The tax-collectors brought out a large plate and imaginary food from their bags, which they placed on the plate, and offered to share the pooled 'food' with both the Pharisees and John the Baptist. It was refused by the Pharisees, who turned away in contempt. John gestured the others to eat, while gently saying, 'No, I only eat locusts'. This comment carried the teaching of the first part of the text (verses 24-26), as well as illustrating verse 33. Luke had written that the 'tax-collectors acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized by him' (verse 29). Within the drama there were no baptisms, rather the symbol of conversion, in that they were now eager to share their food with those whom they had previously extorted, while the Pharisees showed their continuing rejection 'of God's purposes for themselves' (verse 30) by pointedly refusing the tax-collectors' food.

### Scene 3

The third scene presented the narrative setting of the passage and offered a parallel picture to the previous scene. Here it was not John the Baptist, but a white-clad Jesus who was teaching, but again it was to the same two groups. As Jesus taught, the action of the previous scene was repeated, for in response to the charismatic nature of his message the separate pairs were drawn ever closer to Jesus until they formed a circle around him. Again, they sat together and the tax-collectors brought out their plate and imaginary food. As before, the Pharisees moved back out of the circle, this time making exaggerated faces of disgust that emphasised that their pride was unchanged. However, unlike John the Baptist and in contrasting movement to the Pharisees, Jesus leant forward, blessed the 'food' and eagerly joined in the meal. The drama ended with Jesus saying to the Pharisees: 'For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"' (verses 33-34).



***Commentary on the drama***

The scene with John the Baptist had paved the way for fulfilment through Jesus', for though John did not exclude, neither did he participate. It was by moving in to eat together from a common plate that Jesus and the tax-collectors formed the closest circle of fellowship from which the Pharisees in their self-pride excluded themselves. Fellowship with such perceived sinners did not accord with their world-view (verse 32). No one was rejected, for all were invited to enter the one community. But the teaching of both John and Jesus is presented as accepted or rejected through a willingness to draw together into the one fellowship of which Jesus is not only head (he was the one who blessed the food) but also a full participant. Looking on the circle of those eating, it was as Jesus ate with the tax-collectors, that the circle was formed and in sharing from a common plate there were no longer gaps where the Pharisees had been. Had the Pharisees participated, the circle would have been enlarged. The textual passage had become an experienced picture of responding to Jesus and to others.

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