

I thank, thee, O my God, that thou hast **not** given my lot
with those who sit at street corners.

For I am early to work on the words of the Torah,
they are early to work on things of no moment.

I weary myself and profit thereby,
whereas they weary themselves for no profit.

I run towards the life of the Age to Come
and they run towards the well or the pit.

A First Century Talmud prayer not unlike our Pharisee's.

My heart goes out to that Pharisee in Jesus' parable who
didn't so much run the extra mile as the extra light year.

The law required just an annual fast on Yom Kippur.

He fasted twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays,

103 times a year more than necessary,

thirsting and hungering in the hottest, closest of climates.

He paid a tenth to God on everything, even though

oil, wheat and new wine had already been tithed at source.

So he paid an extra 10% on 90%, 19% in all.

At that hour of prayer in the Temple - either 9 am or 3 pm -
the tax-man who coincided with him hadn't a leg to stand on.

He'd be the collector of local taxes, aka the Council Tax,
taking his cut, despised, cast out like a Gentile or robber.

The tradition was that you lifted up your hands
as you whispered your prayers to God.

He daren't even lift up his eyes, but smote his heart,
'God be merciful to me a sinner.'

Psalm 51, *Miserere mei, Deus*, sung every Ash Wednesday.

To be right with God he'd have to pay everyone back
he'd swindled, plus 20%,

1% more generous than the Pharisee,

enslaving himself and his family in the process.

Not a hope in hell.

But hope in Christ, who shocked his hearers to the core
when the Tax Collector went home justified, not the Pharisee.
Oh dear, God me merciful to me, a Pharisee.
As penance, I cycle around the South Bay,
the foreshore packed with portly West Riding trippers
reminding me that the kingdom of Heaven
might come as a bit of surprise.

One Friday afternoon Rachel was teaching some rowdy
4th formers, who got to discussing how much vicars earned.
‘£50,000?’ one lad speculated.
‘Ner, if he earned that much why would she teach us lot?’
It’s only when we realise how truly awful we are
that salvation dawns, a la Psalm 51:13
‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.’