In 2017, down in Melbourne, I did a 30-day silent retreat called the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. Anyone can do this retreat but it's quite challenging: no talking, no noise, and definitely no phone. It's designed so that as many distractions as possible are removed – creating space to hear what God might be saying without day-to-day noise of life which often deafens the ears of our hearts. The first week of this retreat is all about discovering one's own sinfulness and the loving mercy of God. I'd like to read a short extract from my journal from day five, which offers ***something*** of what takes place when people experience their own sinfulness and the loving mercy of God. Please bear in mind that I had celebrated the Sacrament of Reconciliation that very day, and my experience is not necessarily everyone's.

"As I prayed, I felt a healthy sense of shame, as with God's guidance, I noted and reviewed all my sins which came to mind. I felt sorrow for the way my departure from God's love – which was mostly marked by selfishness, blind desire, and a complete masking of my moral compass – hurt both me, and others around me. As I transitioned in my prayer from this 'review' phase and sought God's merciful love, the scowl which had been present on my brow throughout the review disappeared and was replaced by a joyful smile. I felt surprised at the speed of this transition and take this as an indication from God that the sins of my past have indeed been forgiven and forgotten, and that I can more forward from here in freedom. Thank you, Jesus."

Our Gospel today creates a contrast between the person who has no idea of their sinfulness and the person who is intimately aware. Notice what the narrator, Luke, says: "The Pharisee stood there and

said this prayer to [who?] himself" - not God – while the prayer of the tax colector *to* God was one of self-knowledge, humility and contrition. It's important to note that the Pharisees get bad press in the Bible because they often function as those who refuse to live according to the Kingdom of God, which was Jesus' mission and the mission of every baptised Christian for the last 2000 years, to proclaim and promote. For the most part, they were a respected group of educated lay people dedicated to living good and holy lives

And so, why then did the tax collector go home "at rights with God" and the Pharisee did not? Because the closer a person gets to Jesus, the more they experience their sinfulness. This is a good thing because without a knowledge of the ways we separate ourselves from God and others, we often have no need or even desire to seek a personal relationship with Jesus. Without even consciously choosing, they fall into the trap… I go to Mass, I say my prayers, I give to the collection, I try to be a good person,,, I don't really sin…

Pope Francis exemplified the humility and self-knowledge of the tax collector. He regularly and publicly claimed that he was "a sinner who is in need of God's forgiveness." He repeatedly emphasized that his own sinfulness was no different from that of other people.

What happens, then, when, in humility, a person becomes aware of their sinfulness? They experience God's love and mercy – not just as a ***faithful belief***, but as something tangible to them: an overwhelming sense of peace, love, or forgiveness; a joyful smile; an intimate knowledge that they are a beloved daughter or son of God. And this tangible experience then becomes their message of Good News; given to share with others.

St Paul's description of a difficult time in his life in his letter to Timothy that we heard offers ***something*** of his tangible experience of the Lord and its effects: "The Lord stood by me and gave me power, so that through me, the whole message might be proclaimed for all the nations to hear." Paul's mission is our mission: to actively accompany ***other*** people to encounter Jesus, risen and present in our midst.

And so, to conclude, here's the hard truth: if we've stopped being, or have never been, surprised by mercy, it might be because we've stopped being, or have never been, honest about our sin. If our faith feels flat, dry, or safe, perhaps it's because we're praying like the Pharisee – or even not at all – instead of daring to come before God like the tax collector, raw and real. Jesus doesn't meet us in the polished version of ourselves; He meets us in the place in our lives that we ***least*** want Him to see. And it's in ***that*** place — in the honest admission of our weakness — that His mercy breaks in, His love becomes tangible, and our lives begin to speak of the Good News with power. So the question today is not "am I a sinner?" — but "am I humble enough to let God's mercy find me?" Amen.