

HOMILY FOR TRINITY XVI - 2020 - The Two Sons

In today's gospel – the parable of the two Sons, we have a parable that must be put into its context to understand its meaning. The previous 4 verses of Chapter 21 are critical so we must begin there. In verse 17 we are told that at this particular time, Jesus was teaching within the precincts of the temple and the chief priests and elders (that is, the religious authorities, who ran the temple) demanded that he state by what authority he was teaching. Jesus answered by asking them a question ... which he prefaced by saying.... *'I will tell you by whose Authority I teach, if you first answer a question from me.'* The question was... *'From whence came the baptism of John the Baptist.. from Heaven or from men?'*

Now those chief priests and elders debated with themselves and they realised that if they said... *'From Heaven'*, Jesus would say to them, *'Why, then, did you not believe him?'* On the other hand if they said *"From men,"* they would have the crowds against them for the common people all regarded John as a great Prophet. So they answered... *'we do not know.'* To which our Lord replied.. *'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'*

That exchange between Jesus and the chief priests and elders is the immediate background to the parable in today's gospel. The conversation continues with Jesus addressing to those priests and elders the parable of the two sons - one who rudely said he would not do as his Father asked and work in the vineyard but who then changed his mind and did so. And the other son who courteously said he would go straight away and work in the vineyard but who did not. As soon as the scene is painted, Our Lord asks the Chief priests and elders a very simple question indeed: *"Which of the two sons did the will of his father?"* This time they gave what is the obvious reply.. *'the first son.'* That is, the one who said he would not work in the vineyard but who had a change of heart and in due course, obeyed his Father's will.

It the obvious answer. Of course someone who says they won't do some thing that they should do but who changes their mind and does go and does it, is on the right track compared to someone who says... yes Sir, I'll do what you want, but who does not do what they say they will.

An edifice of commentary about this parable is built on the greater goodness of someone who does good deeds but seldom speaks about them compared with someone who professes goodness and virtue but who does little or nothing about it. That commentary can

usually be summed up in that well known saying... ‘actions speak louder than words.’ It conjures up an image of the everyday humble person who quietly goes about doing good but who usually avoids formal religion, compared with the religious hypocrite who waxes lyrical about what all and sundry should do but who is an empty gong or a tinkling cymbal – all talk and no action! That approach to this parable is, in part, the basis of a popular myth that religious people, regular church goers and sincere believers, like you and me, are mostly hypocrites who do little of any worth worth in society compared to the ‘religionless Christianity’ sort of person who is out there with sleeves rolled up performing all sorts of good deeds on the quiet for the poor, the needy, the damaged and so forth, while the hypocrites talk on endlessly about God and do little or nothing.

Leaving aside the easy but false stereotypes just mentioned, we could all admit, I’m sure, that none of us would want to be known as a hypocrite, a mere talker and not a doer, and that is a good thing. As well, all of us, I’m sure, would like to be known as a Good Samaritan - one whose actions speak louder than our words. That too is a good thing.

However, this is not the point of the parable of the two sons. The critical aspect of this parable, that is all too often entirely forgotten, is the importance of John the Baptist in this story. Yes, the Chief priests and elders gave the right answer to our Lord’s question.... *“Which of the two sons did the will of his father?”* Immediately though, Jesus returns to his question about John that they had refused to answer saying... *“I tell you most solemnly, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.”*

The tax collectors and harlots responded to the prophetic and powerful message of repentance proclaimed John the Baptist. They heard his call and repented of their evil ways. Their lives were turned around from being lives of refusing to heed God’s word and obey his precepts, to lives that bore the fruit of righteousness. On the other hand, the Chief priests and elders, who claimed they knew all about God and who even claimed to be practically the proprietors of the faith of Israel, seeing themselves as the legitimate interpreters of that faith, they were the very ones who did not respond to the message of repentance proclaimed by John the Baptist when they heard it. Furthermore, even when they saw the powerfully

transforming effect of John's prophetic message of repentance on the lives of lowly, despised and sinful people like tax collectors and harlots, they still failed to repent.

The crux of the parable is this.... everyone needs to respond to John's message of repentance. Those Chief priests and elders thought they were very religious. They were proud of it in fact, but their lives lacked the humility of true self knowledge which will lead any honest person to know their need of repentance because an honest person will be very much aware of his or her human frailty and sinfulness. Remember Paul's words from the letter to the Romans which he says so truthfully and so succinctly: "*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" Sadly, that truth can be very difficult for some very religious people to hear and apply to their own lives.

We should be just as careful to remember this. The tax collectors and harlots (who represent the bottom drawer of sinful society in ancient Israel of our lord's time) were not really good people underneath it all. Tax collectors for the Roman empire were shunned for the most part as turncoats, informers and Judases. Harlots (both male and female, it needs to be said) represented the worst of flagrant public immorality. Both groups were very sinful people BUT...they did heed the powerful preaching of John the Baptist as did many of the common people and their lives were transformed by grace. They opened their lives anew, or perhaps for the very first time to, to God and to his commandments and precepts. Everything changed for them because they turned anew to God, not because they were basically nice and good underneath it all.

Those tax collectors and harlots were open to God's message given through John, they realised their great need to repent of their sinful lives. They humbly turned to God and obediently accepted his word. The Chief priests and elders, sad to say, were closed to John's call to repentance and they were just as closed to God's power because they were sure they had God on their side already. The heart of the issue is genuine obedience that follows a change of heart versus pretended obedience.

How then should faithful Christians (you and me, dear people) apply this parable to our lives? Firstly do not fall into the trap of trying to do it all ourselves by simply to redoubling our attempts to practise what we preach, to be doers and not just hearers, to be numbered amongst those whose actions speak louder than their words. What we try to do by ourselves is doomed to failure.

Rather, let us take to heart our Lord's words to the Chief priests... *'the tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom before you because they repented and then went and did the will of God.'*

That one sentence should move us to renew once more our own repentance and conversion of life. To ask more earnestly that the saving power of Jesus Christ and his Redeeming Grace might take hold of my life anew. To ask that Grace might bring me to a deeper faith and a greater repentance for my sins. And to ask, even beg with all sincerity, that Grace may yet effect in me a true conversion, a sincere and wholehearted change of heart and a much greater willingness to follow Jesus Christ in all humble obedience.