

Sermon 26th Ordinary Sunday Year A 2017

The Gospel placed before us today once more reassuringly reminds us how our Lord's proclamation of God's reign is drawn from real life. To communicate his vision of God's kingdom, we find time and time again how Jesus anchors it in ordinary life: our life. And this is one reason why the words of our Lord as witnessed in the gospels continue to speak to us through the ages: they echo into our own lives, our own situations, our own contexts and experiences as much today as they did for those who first heard them.

The little scenario presented to us today is familiar to us. We know the kind of situation put to us. '*Son, clean up your room.*' '*Yes Dad, I will,*' only for that room never to be cleaned up... I suspect we've all been let down by friends who said they would help in some way, but fail to do so; family members who said they would turn up at an important moment or occasion but fail ever to arrive, perhaps with excuses – '*I've become so busy, another appointment has come up, or I simply forgot.*' Perhaps we have been those people... And if have been at the receiving end of those disappointments, we know how it chips away at our trust. We all know how in the life of the church how much scandal is caused – and rightly so – when we say one thing and do another. We all know how credibility is damaged, and how ability to actually do what we are meant to do is undermined when we proclaim a noble, pure, beautiful ideal but in fact do something quite different.

Yet, even as Our Lord reminds us of these all-too-human failings he also puts to us our small victories: those who say they *won't* do something, but then *do*; those who turn around; those who surprise us with unexpected and unwarranted acts of generosity; who act in ways never expected. In the little parable placed before us today we want to affirm the rightness of the young man who started out saying he *wouldn't* do what his father asked him, but had a change of heart and in fact did.

However, we don't always make it easy for people to do that. Changing our mind is not greatly valued in our society. So often it is seen as a sign of weakness. We only have to listen to the taunts in parliament when one of our political leaders change course in the light of new information. If it's not simply for political expediency, changing one's mind can be an act of great courage and humility, even heroism. In our culture, converts to Christianity (especially those from an atheistic or agnostic family backgrounds) can be treated with suspicion or even ostracism. It can be hard to shift from one course, one direction, to another.

Our limited, finite, human perspective can often mean we only look at the immediate to make lasting judgements. People can slip up once and we can condemn them forever. We expect past behaviour will *always* determine future behaviour. But surely one of the most captivating and attractive aspects of the good news of God in Jesus Christ is that we are *not* bound to our pasts. God can write a new story into our lives. God looks at us with the perspective of eternity. God sees the final outcome in people's lives. And God can put up with an initial 'No' and a lot of other 'No's' besides, on the way to a final and lasting 'Yes.' We can change. Grace can emerge in unexpected places and in unexpected people.

Yes. Grace can emerge in unexpected places and in unexpected people. But it is this that lay at the heart of the conflict which gives rise to the Gospel portion today. The little exchange we hear today is better understood when we remember that in this part of Matthew's Gospel Jesus has just entered Jerusalem. He has already predicted his death and passion three times. The drama of Holy Week is now unfolding. Jesus has made his way to the Temple and there overturned the tables of the lenders and money changers. The atmosphere is heavy. The air is charged. And so, this exchange between Jesus and the chief priests and elders is to be read in the light of controversy and tension. They have asked Jesus, '*By what authority are you doing these things?*' Jesus is disrupting things.

He is disrupting the practice of the Temple. Earlier in this chapter we are told *the whole city was stirred*. Jesus is disrupting the social ordering. By what authority?! It's a fair question.

Of course, we know as readers of the Gospel that Jesus' authority comes from God. But in this highly charged atmosphere Jesus takes a side step so to avoid a charge of blasphemy. And so, Jesus asked *them* a question which leads into the passage we have before us today, *the baptism of John, was it of God or of men?* This question they refuse to answer. Their refusal to accept the message of the Baptist already shows who and what they are. They had resisted and rejected John's call for repentance. There is no reason to expect any different answer now that Jesus not only continues John's proclamation, but embodies it.

Jesus here clearly aligns himself with the Baptist. He stands in continuity with his proclamation of repentance. In the same way, Jesus stands in continuity with the much wider prophetic tradition in which Israel is a 'light to the nations'. For the prophets, the unique covenant with God is not closed or exclusive for Israel's own benefit. Instead, it is a sign of the destiny of all people. In the same vein, then, for Jesus the kingdom of God is open to all. God's reign does not just take in a very narrow set of who is pure and worthy, but even the most despised, the most unlikely.

But the text today, and the whole unfolding drama around it, also places the elders and chief priests in the much longer narrative of Israel's ancient story. But for them, it's a continuation of Israel's old sin of turning away from God, forgetting God, neglecting God and his covenant. The story of the Old Testament is basically the story of this repeated pattern: God establishes a covenant with the people, the people forget/neglect that covenant, turn away from the relationship with God; and God then seeking to restore, renew that relationship, to draw his people back.

It's that very dynamic we see being played out in the gospel today. God seeking to draw his people through Jesus Christ into renewed relationship with him. Some accept that, embrace that. And others just turn away. This is the tragedy of scene we witness in the Gospel: that God gives a renewed opportunity for the people to know him and experience him. The signs are all there!! John proclaims it. Jesus enacts and realises it. And the tax collectors and prostitutes are responding! But blind self-satisfaction cannot perceive or cannot accept the hand of God at work.

My brothers and sisters, God continues to work in unusual places and through unexpected people. Sometimes our cynicism or our doubt suggests we don't actually trust God to be true to his word: we aren't really convinced that God might actually work through us; that our church – this community – might actually be the sphere through in which God's saving love, his healing grace can be known. Often times it seems doubt whether our lives can indeed turn around (or worse repentance concerns others, not me...). The consistent message of the Gospel is that we cannot dismiss anyone or any situation as beyond God's saving grace. We cannot dismiss any aspect of our own lives – our personal shadows and dark corners – as beyond God's saving grace. To say so is to say God is not really God. The great story of faith is that God is always giving us opportunity to turn to him. May that be a story that is true for us. Amen.