

Twenty Sixth Sunday of the Year October 01, 2017

Ezekiel 18:25-28 Philippians 2:1-11 Matthew 21:28-32

There are many factors that influence our perception of things and our response of the will. These factors must be taken into account when we consider our responsibility for what we do and how we act. But there is always a place deep within us, that responds favorably to do something good and just. This response opens us to God and makes us responsible to the truth, goodness and beauty. It makes us believe in the ultimate one who directs our life and our destiny. Today's Readings emphasize that what we do is the real measure of our belief in God. Prophet Ezekiel in the first reading stresses individual responsibility for one's own actions. There is only one way to "life": by living a virtuous life here and now. This way is open to anyone who, by his own actions, does what is right. When the sinner renounces his evil ways, he deserves to live. In today's Gospel Jesus reminds us that words do not express the full human response to God, until they are put into practice in each person's life. What is required is the integral response of the whole person: his thoughts, words and actions in total human capability. To draw on a Biblical distinction, our search and openness to the experience of God needs to involve the heart even more than the mind. It is the heart that is the origin of our desires and actions. The heart turns doctrine into action. Matthew's here distinguishes clearly between those considered nominally good and those who actually do well. One son only says he will work and the other does the actual work. Jesus declares, in a way that must have shocked the legalistic mindset of his hearers, that prostitutes and tax collectors are entering the Kingdom of God before the chief priest and the elders. In other words the one who works for his salvation will achieve it. Paul in the second reading appeals to the Church at Philippi to live in unity, and the key to unity is humility, which regards others as more important than oneself. This inspires Christians to a practical interest in others' needs. Their model is Jesus who, in the words of an early hymn, took the form of a slave and served and obeyed to the point of death.

Prophet Ezekiel in the first reading of today says that those who turn away from their wickedness by doing what is lawful and right, they will be saved. At the same time, those who consider themselves saved and have turned away from their righteousness to commit sins will die for it. This is a very powerful message. God himself had appointed Ezekiel to preach the word to a rebellious people. The Prophet devoted all his efforts to getting them to accept the reality of the exile.

But they refused to listen to him. Here Ezekiel explains to them that a relationship with God is the responsibility of each person. God calls each and every person to exhibit the standards of heaven in what they say and do. What God wants from them is their total attachment to him, respect the rights of others and show generosity to the less fortunate. God judges the persons according to their merit or in their failure to do so. Again, the prophet wanted his contemporaries to know that God is constantly calling them to life. Whatever may be their past mistakes, they are called upon to repent and live a new life. There are two messages coming out loud and clear. On the one hand, we can never be complacent about our relationship with God. We can fail at any time. Secondly, no matter how far we have strayed from God, no matter how depraved we have become, it is never too late to turn back and we can be absolutely sure that a warm, no-questions-asked welcome is waiting for us.

In the Second Reading we have the magnificent hymn about Jesus' own spirit of service and selflessness. Paul says this in the context of a plea for greater unity in the Christian community at Philippi. In urging the Christians to serve each other's needs with the deepest respect, he asks them to have the mind of Jesus himself, to think like he does. Paul tells them that when we are of one mind, having the same love as Christ, there is encouragement in Christ. He sees Christ and the Spirit as the important agents of such unity. We find consolation during our tribulations and share in the same Spirit. Being of one spiritual mind, we seek the Will of God in all things. Paul urges them in complete humility to regard others as better than themselves. He then points to Christ's humble obedience and invites them to live in such humility and obedience to God. The goal of every faithful Christian is to enjoy the same mind that was in Jesus Christ. He illustrates this by quoting what seems to have been an early Christian hymn. It speaks of the awesome dignity of Jesus as the Son of God. Yet Jesus did not emphasize this in his life among us. Having taken human form in the image of man, He humbled Himself and obeyed His Heavenly Father until the end - even death on the cross. He went further and took on the status of a slave and ultimately accepted human death, and the most shameful of all possible deaths, death as a convicted criminal on a cross, a barbaric form of execution. Having obeyed God the Father to the end, Jesus was raised above all and given the name that is above every name, the Name of Jesus. Because of the greatness of the mystery of God that is found in the Most Holy Name of Jesus, whenever His Name is mentioned, every knee

should bend, in heaven and on earth. Every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In today's gospel Jesus presents a further challenge to the religious leaders of the people. This challenge is expressed in the parable about two sons whose father operates a vineyard. He asks the first son to go and work there. The lad refuses but later changes his mind and goes and works. The second one is also told to go and work in the vineyard. He agrees to do so but in the end he does not go at all. Jesus asks them the question to choose the one who did his father's will. They all agree that it was the one who at first had refused to go but later did go and work. In case there was any doubt, Jesus then clearly spells out the meaning of his story. Tax collectors and prostitutes, perhaps the most despised of all people from the religious leaders' point of view, were making their way into the kingdom of God before the chief priests and the elders. In their eyes, it was a shocking and dreadfully insulting thing to say. As proof of what he says, Jesus reminds them that they refused to believe John the Baptist, "a pattern of true righteousness", when he called people to repentance. On the other hand, the tax collectors and prostitutes did. And, even after that, the priests and elders refused to do so. They were there, of course, watching but John's words did not concern them. In the eyes of the priests and elders, the idea that tax collectors and prostitutes should enter the kingdom before them was outrageous. The very idea that such evil and immoral people should take precedence over the religious leaders in God's eyes would be totally unjust.

Today's Gospel parable is clearly directed at the religious and civil leaders of the people in Jesus' time. They spoke much about God and, in particular, how God was to be served by a strict observance of the Law. But it is clear they did not have the spirit that Jesus was communicating through his life and teaching, namely, the spirit of love, compassion, caring and forgiveness for the weak and vulnerable. They also heard the teaching of Jesus but made no effort to carry it out. They excused themselves by challenging Jesus' legal authority to do what he was doing. Because Jesus did not fit into the parameters of their legal world, they could not classify him and they rejected him. On the other hand, Jesus tells them that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before they do. These certainly were not keeping God's Law. They even had said No to his commandments many times. But then they encountered Jesus and they experienced a radical transformation in their lives. They listened to him

and they responded. The chief priests and the elders are like the second son in the story. They say 'Yes' to obey God but they do not listen to Jesus, the Son of God, or follow his instructions. The sinners, the outcasts of both Jewish and Gentile society, are like the first son. They do not obey God's commands, they commit many sins, but later they accept the teaching of Jesus and become his followers.

The teaching that is presented in the parable was touching the life of the Jewish people. Jesus was telling the leaders of the Jews the fact that they were God's chosen people and that they were proud of their observance of the Law of Moses was not a guarantee that they will possess the kingdom of Heaven. Rather because of their pride and their refusal to obey God's call to repentance they will exclude themselves, while the tax collectors and sinners whom they despised will repent of their sins and will be accepted into God's Kingdom. This parable was mainly intended to show the hypocrisy of Chief Priests and Elders of the Jews and the perilous position in which they stood in relation to God and heaven. They were condemning themselves before Jesus when they condemned the son who did not work at all. Like him they pretended to be fully interested in the work of God but they were involved with themselves. But the other son was willing to repent and accept the call of his father. In the same way God is always ready to call everyone and his invitation is personal and open. There is no force in it but a gentle invitation. Thus Jesus reminds us that words do not express the full human response to God; however he may be experienced in each person's life. What is required is the integral response of the whole person: his thoughts, words, actions, and full human capability.

This parable of the Two Sons is unique to Matthew and many scholars feel that he might have composed it himself to present the situation of the early church. However, we are presented with the actual situation during the time of Jesus regarding the response of the religious groups. It is a straight forward parable and the issue proposed presents clear choices. It opens the mind of the listener and reader to judge what is right: whether it is good to say something you will do and later not do it or to promise someone that you will not do something and later regret the action and do it. In fact both of them seem to be no good sons in their response to their father. Both of them were imperfect. But it is far nobler to change the mind and do good than to remain set in the direction of evil. We are not saved by belonging but by becoming. In our relationship with God actions

speak louder than words. Thus in the context of the parable the son who actually did what his father requested fulfilled his father's will. This supports a strong point that Matthew makes throughout the gospel that doing the will of God is far superior to just talking about it. This parable however, does not end with the point it already made. Matthew provides with specific references to tax collectors and prostitutes entering the kingdom of God before the religious leaders to whom Jesus is speaking. He recalls here how earlier in the Gospel he referred to the Sadducees and Pharisees when they came to be baptized at Jordan. He called them a generation of vipers that has come to flee from the wrath to come. As it turned out this group had gone through the motions of repentance but obviously did not believe and therefore did not change. They are similar to the son who said he would go out to work in his father's vineyard but did not go. Since Jesus presented the parable in terms of characters, the leaders were almost obliged to respond without realizing that they were condemning themselves.

What is clear from this Gospel and from the First Reading is that God is primarily concerned with our present relationship to him. As far as the past is concerned, God has a very short memory. In fact, we might say he has none at all. This is the "injustice" of God that Ezekiel mentions. We remember the man who was crucified with Jesus on Calvary. He was a major criminal, a brigand, a robber, perhaps a murderer. There, in the very last moments while hanging on the cross he asks pardon and forgiveness -- "Jesus, remember me when you enter into your Kingdom." The reply comes instantly, without any qualifications whatsoever, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." The forgiveness he receives is immediate and total. The readings tell us that it is never too late for God's mercy. Peter knew that when he repented of his denial of his Lord. Even the betrayal of Judas was not beyond God's power to forgive. In fact Jesus tells us that no sin is greater in the power of God to forgive. His mercy waits patiently and he wants all to turn towards him and be with him. Jesus calls us today to make our own personal choices. In those choices we are free and individually responsible for our own actions. In this context the Psalm of today echoes the sincere cry of the psalmist who sincerely wants to follow the Lord's way, and recognizes his own need of the Lord's mercy for his sins. The psalm also recognizes the Lord's favor towards those who humble themselves before him.

An elderly carpenter was ready to retire. He told his employer-contractor of his plans to leave the house-building business and live a more leisurely life with his

wife, enjoying his extended family. He would miss the pay check, but he needed to retire. They could get by. The contractor was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a favour. The carpenter said yes, but in time it was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and used inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end a dedicated career. When the carpenter finished his work the employer came to inspect the house. He handed the front-door key to the carpenter. "This is your house," he said, "My gift to you!" The carpenter was shocked! What a shame! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently. So it is with us. We build our lives, a day at a time, often putting less than our best into the building. Then with a shock we realize we have to live in the house we have built. If we could do it over, we'd do it much differently. But we cannot go back. Build wisely!

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