

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders: "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

REFLECTION 1: THE BETTER OF TWO BAD SONS

Jesus had entered Jerusalem. He had driven the stallholders out of the Temple courtyard and the Jewish authorities immediately confronted him as to what authority he had done these things? Jesus answered them with a question of his own as to the authority for the mission of John the Baptist but they were unable to respond, 'we do not know' they said. So Jesus refuses to tell them the source of his authority and instead he chooses to relate today's parable of the Two Sons (Matt 21: 28-32).

The meaning of the parable is obvious to his listeners. The Jewish leaders are the people who said they would obey God and then did not. The tax collectors and the prostitutes are those who said they would do their own thing but later thought better of it and then went God's way. The key to understanding this parable is that it is not really praising anyone. Rather it sets before us two imperfect kinds of people of whom one kind is nonetheless better than the other. Neither son in the story was the kind of fellow that would fill any father with joy. Both were unsatisfactory, but the one in the end who obeyed was better than the other. The ideal son on the other hand would have been the one who willingly accepted the father's wishes and promptly carried them out.

The parable tells of two very common classes of people in this world. First there are the people whose promises are much better than their practice. They will promise anything and make all sorts of gestures of loyalty. 'No problem' they say, but the follow up leaves much to be desired. Then there are those whose practice is far better than their promises. They claim to be tough and hard-headed, but are sometimes discovered to be doing kindly and generous things, almost in secret as if they were ashamed to be known as 'a goodie two shoes'. They may even profess to have little interest in the Church or religion and yet they live good Christian lives.

Similar characteristics are also reflected in the lives of Bible people such as Jonah, the reluctant prophet who first said 'no' to God who directed him to summon the Ninivites to repentance. Only after a dose of divine persuasion and a 'whale of a time', was he obliged to turn his 'no' into a 'yes'. Then nearer our own times there was a certain Thomas Merton, a fanatical Communist who became a Trappist monk, who in his autobiography wrote; 'I was overwhelmed with a profound insight into the mystery and corruption of my own soul, I was filled with the horror of what I saw and my soul craved for escape with an intensity I never experienced before'. In that mood, Merton began to pray and the many 'nos' that had characterized his life, were transformed into a resounding 'yes' for God. Even the late Dr Ian Paisley, whose political life was dominated by a negative riposte, gradually said 'yes' to the peace accord of our times.

All these people had discovered the power and the wisdom of Jesus breaking into their lives with the strength and grace to change. To begin to say 'yes' in new and definite ways, a 'yes' to fresh ways of serving, a 'yes' to lay involvement at every level, regardless of gender, 'yes' to unconditional forgiveness, 'yes' to Jesus and to God.