

26th Sunday in Ord. Time

October 1, 2017

Mathew 21. 28-32

Fr. Thomas Joseph

Thomas Merton was orphaned at 16, became a communist at 20, and found Christ at 23. At 24 he became a New York Times reporter. At 26 he put all his possessions in a duffle bag, went to Kentucky and became a Trappist monk. In his best-selling spiritual autobiography, called *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton described the first step in his conversion process. He writes: “The whole thing passed in a flash... I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul... I was filled with horror at what I saw... And my soul desired escape from all this with an intensity and urgency unlike anything I had ever known before.” The story of Thomas Merton illustrates the kind of change of heart Ezekiel refers to in today’s first reading.

The Gospel highlights how we live our faith with the parable of the two sons who are asked to work in the father’s vineyard. The first says: “I will not go!”, but afterwards thought better and went. The second son says: “Certainly Sir!” But he did not go. “Which one did the father’s will?” asks Jesus. Jesus himself replies to the rhetorical question, “The first.” And then says to the Pharisees “Tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before you.”

What is the message Jesus wants to convey us through this parable? We have to be people of our word and back up our words with appropriate action. A good test is to check our dealings with our brothers and sisters. When we say ‘Yes’ do we mean it?

The second point being made in today’s Gospel is that even if we have said ‘No’ to God, it is never too late to reflect upon our initial response and change it to say yes! We are always welcome to enter our Father’s house no matter how late! He always gives us a second chance! The temple priests and

the Pharisees were condemned because they preferred to be seen as people who observed the letter of the law. But the sinners and prostitutes were justified, because, even-though they had sinned they were ready to repent. When John the Baptist preached repentance, the Pharisees did not feel the need to repent whereas the tax collectors and sinners came forward to listen and be baptized by him.

In the final analysis, our commitment to God is not measured by lip service and external ritual but by good deeds that prove our repentance. The first son whose word was 'No' but whose action became a 'Yes', is held out to us as the one who did the Father's will even though he was late in doing so.

Today's parable is short and offers few concrete details, so that we must make an effort to read it creatively thus providing us the different temperaments of the two sons.

"I will not go!" – the first son comes across as rough, impetuous, rebellious; but like many with that temperament, he simmers down once he "thinks better of it." From the second son's "Certainly, sir" we get the picture of one who speaks with pleasing words and is superficial; but he does not deliver. We can identify with both – as children or as parents!

The last verses of today's Gospel (31b-32) is a call to conversion: a call to radically change our lives, e.g. giving up a life-long addiction, returning to the practice of faith after many years or letting go of grudges and reconciling with long-standing enemies.

It is also a call to convert our daily lives, by forgiving someone who hurt us, shaking off discouragement or beginning to pray regularly.

Jesus reminds the chief priests and elders that they have been refusing to listen to similar calls over a long period of time:

- John the Baptist preached and they did not listen;
- the tax collectors and prostitutes believed, but the priests and elders still did not listen;
- Jesus preached, and still, they did not listen;
- the tax collectors and prostitutes listened and were now making their way into

the kingdom, but the priests and elders still do not listen. Now, in this Gospel, Jesus is offering another opportunity to convert.

We have all lived through the experience of receiving repeated messages that we should change our lives. The messages come from different quarters – a member of our family, a friend, our bodies, or observing the failure of someone close to us. We celebrate the final call when we eventually listen.

This Gospel passage reminds us that true conversion does not leave our egos intact. It is always a humbling experience, like the one Jesus calls the chief priests and elders to accept – seeing those we had looked down upon make their way into the kingdom before us. Conversion is always a turning of the tables, “holy ones” exchange places with “sinners.”

The question posed by Jesus touches a fundamental human dilemma: the gap between words and deeds, between intention and decision, between desires expressed in the calm of reflection and the quick fixes of lived life. This is a gap we all know, primarily in others whose deeds often fail to match their high-minded words!

This parable is an important reality check in our practice of discipleship: it is easy to talk, but practice is more difficult. However, the gospel also raises more profound questions for us than simply reminding us to practice what we preach. The gospel poses us a series of interconnected challenges.

First, there is the challenge to act with integrity: bring the inward person and the outward person into harmony. This is not simply the moral and the psychological challenge of integrity, but is at the heart of right living and faith. This quest for harmony takes place in the presence of God: we need to have integrity not just in ourselves, but in the divine presence before whom we are transparent.

Second, we know that integrity is a quest for wholeness: that the various parts of our lives are connected to one another. Wholeness involves us as individuals, as members of families and communities, and its links continue to expand.

Third, we are called by God to be people of obedient faith, and that means that we are not just dealing with a religion of ideas or warm feelings. Anything declared as believed is tested in so far as it informs our commitment to creation.

Fourth, the obedient son first rebelled and then recognized the path that he should follow. Being disciples involves taking this second look at our actions. We all like to declare our independence and to state boldly that ‘We will not serve!’ It is part of our human nature to be aware of our independence and freedom. Yet, as disciples, we must balance this with our appreciation of the limitations of our knowledge and of the Wisdom that created us. Integrating awareness of our freedom with our acknowledgment of the Christ as our teacher is an essential part of completeness and wholeness. It is part of the wisdom and integrity of holiness.

Fifth and finally, there is a challenge to each of us to acknowledge the generosity of God. We all tend to think of ourselves as models of humanity, and as Christians we even tend to think of ourselves as model disciples. But here lies a great illusion! Those whom Jesus met that were self-satisfied, he challenged with questions. Those whom the self-satisfied automatically excluded, the tax collectors and prostitutes, he sat and ate with so that they might come to know the goodness and forgiveness of God.

The parable teaches us that it was the first son who converted. He initially said ‘No’ but then thought better of it, and then actually did what the father requested. He had the honesty and the humility to realize his mistake and change his decision. He became reliable.

Perhaps too often we are like the second son who initially said ‘Yes’ to his father’s request, and then quickly ignored the request. We easily say ‘Yes’ to God without meaning what we say. Then our word becomes meaningless. The parable of the father and the two sons challenges us to do God’s will in action and not just concur verbally. This requires that, like the first son, we are continually open to the possibility of conversion in our lives and that we are honest and humble enough to change our decisions when we recognize that they are wrong decisions, especially in matters relating to our salvation and the salvation of others.

Are we people of our word? How do we speak to our loved ones, to our friends, to our colleagues at work, to God? In what ways does our sincerity manifest itself? It would be good to be people of our word. Let us decide to be honest and humble enough to undergo conversion every day and to change our wrong decisions.