

Fr Tom's homily for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Ezekiel 18:25-28
Second Reading: Philippians 2:1-11
Gospel: Matthew 21:28-32



Never judge a book by its cover. How many times have we heard that phrase, but more importantly, how many times have we taken that phrase to heart?

We live in a world where there is a great deal of cynicism towards people in public life. Are our politicians doing in private what they are proclaiming in public? Are our clergy living lives of integrity? It is very easy to write people off one way or another because of prejudices that we gain through others.

But Jesus in his parable calls us away from that today. In the parable, nothing is as it seems. The first son seems respectful to the father but will ultimately be a disappointment. The second son comes off as insensitive but will honour his father by fulfilling his request. I guess it is tough to judge a book by its cover. That is precisely the point!

But who do we relate to in that story? There is something of the second son in today's gospel in all of us, the son who told his father he would work in the vineyard, but never did so. Our 'yes' can become a 'no' in practice. There can be many reasons for this. We may say 'yes' just to keep someone happy, without ever really intending to follow up on what we are asked. Or some of us may find it hard to say 'no'. We may tend to say 'yes' to every request and have the intention to follow through, even though we could not possibly do all that we promise to do.

If there can be something of the second son in all of us, there can also be something of the first son in us as well. I am sure we have had the experience of saying 'no' to some request, and then, having thought it over, changed our mind and agreed to do what we didn't want to do. Our first reactions are not always our best ones. They do not always express what, deep down, we really intend. We all struggle with various forms of self-centredness and selfishness, and sometimes our initial 'no' comes out of that. We might initially say 'no' to avoid what we think will be difficult or demanding. Yet, very often, when we think back over our 'no', we come to realise that it has not done us justice. We recognise that saying 'yes' would be the more generous thing to do, more in keeping with what we desire at the depths of our being. Having reflected a little, we can find ourselves contacting the person to whom we initially said 'no' and saying something like, 'Look I have thought this over, and I would like to do it'.

In our spiritual life, that process is a conversion, and in today's gospel, Jesus is putting out a call to conversion. He is pointing out to the chief priests and elders the need for conversion. The need to live with integrity.

That's the point of Jesus's words to the Pharisees which close this passage. They see in this simple case that it's just obvious that the one who does the father's will is the one who repents of his rejection of the father will, the one who acts badly but then makes amends.

The Pharisees were religious rigorists, who wanted everyone to keep the law of Moses - nothing wrong in that, of course, but they tended to look down on people who didn't keep the law as they did. The prostitutes and tax collectors who responded to John's call to repentance had made a bad start: being a tax collector involved making a living by extorting your own people and doing so with the support of the local oppressors. It wasn't for nothing that Jews hated and vilified tax collectors. But in repentance, they recognised their faults and showed their desire for something new and better. They showed that they, after all, wanted to live the way of righteousness that John preached. They wanted their Father's will.

The Pharisees, however, rejected John. They didn't see the need for repentance in their own lives and they didn't think it was right to spend time with sinners. They wanted to encourage the strong and live pure lives, rather than to bind up the weak. They believed so strongly in their own cause that they forgot the Scriptures, where they could have read of God's forgiveness for those who repent. In doing this, they showed that, after all, they didn't want the Father's will. They had said yes, but they weren't going to go. They didn't accept the power and the importance of repentance and forgiveness.

It's possible, then, to get distracted or misled on the way to God. It's possible even to do the terrible thing of rejecting God and his love. We must never think, however, that it's too late for repentance, in our own or in other's cases. No-one is lost, unless they really don't want God and his ways of love after all.

That is a message which we all need to hear. Whatever 'no's we may have said in the past need not determine our present or future responses. Each day is a new day, a new opportunity to say 'yes' to the Lord's call as it comes to us through those among whom we live and work. It is never too late to grow more fully into the mind and heart of Christ. God is prepared to wait. So will we live a life of saying "Yes" to God and his will for us?

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed Sunday. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch. See you in church I hope! Keep in close contact with the website for news of how practical plans are developing.