

26TH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME, CYCLE A

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

Holy Spirit Catholic Church: September 27, 2020

In Matthew's Gospel, we have now arrived with Jesus in Jerusalem. It is the last week of his life, and he will spend it teaching in the temple area, desiring until his very last breath to call sinners back home to God.

He has just cleansed the Temple of the moneychangers and those buying and selling animals for sacrifice, infuriating the religious leaders who depend on this exchange. Immediately preceding today's passage in Matthew, the religious leaders have challenged Jesus to state upon whose authority he acts in such a way. There will be other confrontations in the Sundays to come as they try to trap Jesus on whether to pay taxes to Caesar or not and about what is the greatest commandment.

But for today, and for the following two Sundays, Jesus in Matthew's Gospel will lay out three parables directed at these religious leaders, challenging them to a change of mind and heart, inviting them to conversion: Today the Parable of the 2 Sons, next Sunday the Parable of the Tenants and then the Parable of the Wedding Feast.

These arrogant chief priests, elders, scribes, and Pharisees have closed their minds and hearts to Jesus and led the people of Israel astray.

They are blinded by their absolute certitude that they alone know God's way and God's will.

These religious leaders reveal the human tendency toward self-righteousness, thinking they are better than others because they know better.

Their minds are made up, they refuse to be taught by Jesus,

But Jesus, even in these last days of his life, has not given up hope in these religious leaders nor a desire for their conversion.

By his use of parables, Jesus is not trying to win an argument with them but rather trying to win over their hearts for God.

But lest we be tempted to think these parables have nothing to say to us, tempted to think that we are not like the self-righteous religious leaders, we are invited to think again.

We are invited to conversion.

This parable today of the 2 sons is meant to trouble our conscience.

What we are always invited to do by Jesus is to repent, which literally means to change our minds, so that our hearts might be changed and we might act in accord with God's will.

This ongoing process of conversion, this daily emptying ourselves of selfishness and vainglory, lasts until the day we die.

What Jesus is seeking from everyone he encounters is conversion of heart.

For Jesus sees in each person both the need and the possibility to change for the better.

This parable of the 2 Sons is all about doing the will of our Heavenly Father, and all of us, if we are honest with ourselves, will admit our failures to act on what our Father asks.

Those outside the Church, those who are not here today, are more likely to see their need for God's mercy and for forgiveness and the need to change their lives. The temptation for those of us who are here, especially since there is a part of us which feels like we have earned a special privilege from God by risking being at Mass during a pandemic, is toward self-righteousness, is to judge others and think we are better than all those "sinners" out there.

But only converted sinners enter the Kingdom of God.

Only those who are humble enough to see their own sins clearly, instead of looking for the sins of other, can do fruitful work in the vineyard of God's Kingdom.

The central concern of Christ Jesus and of his followers—of Christians—is how the human will made rebellious by sin and turned in on itself can gradually open up, turn outward, and finally converge with the life-giving will of God.

For there is a bit of both sons in each of us.

Our instinct is either to say "NO" to invitations extended by God or by life or to mumble a half-hearted "YES" which we do not intend to live out.

We have all said “NO” to what God the Father asks of us through His Son.
We’ve said NO to many requests from others and then had second thoughts or regrets and changed our mind.

We have all said a half-hearted “YES” to our Father, and then refused to do the work He asks us to do to bring about His Kingdom.

We have all said “YES” to do things big and small with the best of intentions, and then not followed through.

We do this all the time in our daily life, saying Yes before reflecting on what we are saying Yes to, perhaps because of an unhealthy desire to please and be approved.

Sinners, one and all, hesitating perpetually between Yes and No, have only one option: to listen to the voice of Jesus and allow the power and truth of his words to burn through all the layers of our delusions until the core of our utter neediness is revealed to us.

Without the help of the Lord Jesus, it is practically impossible to say “YES” to the will of his Father.

This parable reveals that God is interested not so much in our initial response but rather in what we will do with our freedom in the long run.

For only God has the patience to wait throughout a lifetime for all of our instinctual “No’s” to become one eternal YES to His love.

Like the landowner in last Sunday’s parable who kept going out throughout the day in search of workers for his vineyard, so our Heavenly Father continues to go out to us, asking us over and over again to work in His vineyard today.

Thus we are invited daily to a change of heart and a conversion to the Father’s will.

God wants more than lip service—

the Father wants us to do His will in the practice of our life.

What ultimately counts are not the promises we make, but the actions we take.

Fr. Joseph A. Jacobi