

26th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A 2020

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

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

Dear sisters and brothers, in this weekend's Gospel Jesus tells us the story of two sons whose father sends them to work in the vineyard. This parable is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. In this Gospel the focus is on refusal of the religious leaders to repent and believe in Jesus. Their unbelief is contrasted with the belief of tax collectors and prostitutes. This is press home in the parable of the two sons.

The religious leaders were meant to see themselves in the second son – he agreed to go into the vineyard but did not go. The religious leaders promised to work for God but failed to do so, and so have excluded themselves from the kingdom. They recognized that the second son who said he would do what the father wanted represents them and their promise to do what God asked of them without ever doing it. The first son who refused to go but changed his mind – he represents the tax collectors and prostitutes who rejected God at first but then reformed their lives at the preaching of John the Baptist. The first son represented sinners. They originally chose to go their own way but then repented and took God's way, and so gained entry into the kingdom. Repentance is necessary disposition for entry into the kingdom. Even when the leaders of the people saw the great effects of John's preaching, they still refused to repent and believe in him.

Dear sisters and brothers, this is a parable we all can understand, especially parents. A father has two sons and tells them to work in his vineyard. The first son says, "I'm on my way" and never goes. We can understand the disappointment and anger of the father. We can also understand the father's frustration when the second son says, "No, I'm too busy." But then he goes and does the work. We can appreciate as well the father's love and forgiveness to the son who finally followed through. It is difference between words and actions. We all know people who are superb with rhetoric and promises but seem to disappear when it comes to performance. Something always seems to come up.

The Lord addresses this parable to the Scribes and Pharisees who were so precise about the Law but in their daily lives did not show the mercy and compassion God wanted. They are like the first son. Their words said, "yes" but their lives said, "no." Then, there were the outcasts who lived lives of sin but at John the Baptist's call to repentance, they changed. Initially they said "no" to God, now they embraced the kingdom life. Like the second son, they ended up doing the Lord's will.

We can apply this parable to ourselves in three following ways.

First, how we actually live our lives shows what we really believe. Our actions, more truly than words, show what we are able to articulate a perfectly orthodox faith yet live as a functional atheist. The best evidence of what we really believe is how we live. Spouses show love not by words but by actions. We show our loyalty to our friends not by words but by standing by them in good times and bad. Our lives more than our words, show what we really believe.

Second, in all of us there is a gap between what we profess and how we live. We all can say along with St. Paul in this weekend's second reading that Jesus is Lord. But, is Jesus really Lord of our life, of our financial life, our sexual life, our social life, our professional life, our work life, our private life and our family life? That is what conversion of life is all about. When we speak about "conversion" we usually mean someone joining a church. But it also means a more thorough embrace of what Christianity means. Often, it takes time to truly let Jesus be Lord.

Thirdly, this brief parable of the Lord about the father and his two sons is a parable of high consolation and of deep challenge to us. The example of the second son who said, "no" and then went and did the work in the vineyard teaches us that a person's "no" can become a "yes." Sometimes, for all kinds of reasons, people distance themselves from the Lord and from the Church. Then, at certain junctures of their life, they gradually find themselves working in the vineyard, doing the Lord's work. Their "no" becomes a "yes."

There is another, more troubling side to this parable. Like the first son, we can find ourselves going through the motions of prayer and performing the traditions of our faith but the substance of surrender and obedience is gone. Our "yes" has become a "no." We can find ourselves going through the motions in marriage but the commitment to that one other person that should shape everything we do has evaporated. We are living of fumes. Our "yes" has become a "no."

We all can describe the problems of our world in some detail. The capital sins are alive and well. But what do we do in the face of such a situation? Do we endorse it, enhance it, amplify it, continue it, pass it on, or do we oppose it, contradict it? Do we take the cues for our life from life around us or from the Lord of life? Do we allow the world to turn our "yes" into a "no"? Is our "yes" to Christ becoming a "no" in how we live? That is the haunting question of this parable for every one of us.

In our lives, there are two words that we use very frequently. Though they are very small words they are very important ones. It is no exaggeration to say that our lives could be summed up in terms of these two words. They are the words "yes" and "no".

God has given us the freedom to say "yes" or "no" – our "yes" would have no value unless we were free to say "no". However, we may say "yes" to God with our words, and "no" to God with our deeds. We profess to believe, but fail to translate our belief into

active obedience. Words are no substitute for deeds. We must, therefore, constantly examine ourselves. We must try to turn our promises into fulfillment, and our words into deeds. Every day we can turn one of yesterday's "no" into one of today's "yesses".

There is part of both of those sons in each of us. This means we can learn from both.

We can learn from the first son – the one who said he wouldn't go but later changed his mind and went. To change one's mind is sometimes regarded as a weakness. But this is not always the case. To change one's mind can mean to repent, that is, to think again. It takes humility to admit one's mistake, and courage to put it right.

Many of the greatest saints in the history of the Church were sinners who initially said "no" to God, but later changed their mind (that is, repented), and said "yes". St Augustine is perhaps the best-known example, but there are many, many others.

We can learn from the second son – the one who said he would go but didn't. He is meant as a warning to us. We must not allow words to take the place of deeds. Promises can never take place of performance. Fine words never be a substitute for fine deeds. However, Jesus is not holding up either son as a model. The ideal son would be the son who immediately and willingly carried out his father's wishes. Jesus is the ideal Son. St Paul says that with him it was always "yes" (2 Cor 1:20). And in this weekend's Second Reading he says, "Jesus emptied himself and became obedient to the point of death, death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him, giving him a name that is above all other names." Jesus is the model for us.

All of us are called to conversion, because conversion is a necessary disposition for entry into the kingdom of God. But the conversion that above all Jesus sought to bring about in people was a change of heart. And he succeeded in bringing it about in the most unlikely of people. Many sinners heeded his call to conversion of heart, changed their lives, and made their way into the kingdom. But many religious people stubbornly resisted his call to conversion of heart, refused to change their lives, and so excluded themselves from the kingdom. We need the Lord to touch our hearts with his love and compassion. People are essentially good. But this goodness has to be awakened and called forth if we are to enter the Lord's kingdom, which is a kingdom of love.

Dear sisters and brothers, to follow Jesus is to seek to do all that He asks of us. No matter how many times we have said "no" to God, we still can change and seek God's will and God forgives us our faults. But if we are always saying good things and doing nothing, then we are not doing the will of God. Amen.

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