**OTA26 2017**

We are so familiar with hearing the parables that we probably don’t often notice that they are addressed to different groups of people. Sometimes to a crowd; sometimes to the disciples alone; or sometimes to the Pharisees with their particular attitude to religion.

The parable in today’s gospel is addressed to two groups; the chief priests, the custodians of Temple worship in the holy city of Jerusalem; and elders who led the local communities and tribes. These were public figures and so could be fairly held to account both for the sincerity of their own faith lives and for how far their words matched their deeds.

Jesus contrasts the behaviour of two sons in this parable, to prompt these leaders to consider if they are in fulfilling their responsibilities with integrity or whether they rest on the laurels of status and reputation alone. In other words, were they focused on serving God’s purposes or were they more concerned with how others regarded them?

Jesus presses his point home by comparing their response to the mission of John the Baptist, with that of tax collectors and prostitutes.

John was the son of a temple priest, (one of their own), so they would have expected him to follow in his father’s footsteps (the priesthood was hereditary), by taking his place on the duty rota, donning the temple vestments, and conducting the prescribed rituals.

But, John’s message was too urgent to wait in line, he chose garments associated with prophets those quintessential critics of the establishment, and he devised his baptism ritual to be conducted in the open air, far from the hallowed sanctuary of the Temple.

Such must have scandalized the priests and elders; prompting them to judge John on appearances and closing their minds to the substance of his message. They could not countenance that God might act beyond the boundaries of their own established system. Like the second son, they would only follow the will of the Father if it served their predetermined expectations.

In contrast, the tax collectors and prostitutes, already familiar with the edges of respectable society, were better equipped spiritually to hear John’s call to conversion. A conversion by which see ourselves through God’s eyes of love, rather than the judgments of others. Assured of God’s love they could redirect their desires to express trust in God’s plan; the path of the first son.

If we want to apply the message of today’s gospel to our own lives then the question posed at the beginning of the second reading would be a good place to start, does “Our life in Christ [truly] means anything” to us?

Is our trust in God an occasional Sunday add-on or the foundation of our everyday lives?

Thomas Merton wrote a prayer in which he accepts his inability to predict or control the future. This allows him to reset his desires and so trust in God’s providence.

As we listen to Merton’s words perhaps we can make them our own:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

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