

26th Sunday (A)

- Isn't it interesting how Jesus does so much of his teaching through storytelling - Jesus communicates his most telling truths through the medium of fiction; he invites his hearers to use their imagination & follow him into the world of parable – a story.
- The truth of Jesus' parables doesn't depend on whether the tales told actually happened — but rather, their claim to truth depends on whether they catch something of the unseen reality of the kingdom, or whether they disclose unrecognised truths about people's commitment to God & their relationships with each other.
- In the parable we are invited to enter a visual world of dinner parties, sheepfolds, vineyards, welcome households, threatening journeys; a world peopled by rich merchants, mugged travellers, callous judges, awkward neighbours, selfish hosts, good employers, searching housewives, broken families, warring kings, surprised guests, wise & foolish bridesmaids.
- The point of the parables is not that they make interesting illustrations or stories for children; the stories tell us that it is at the level of our eating, drinking, sleeping, forgiving, choosing, reaching out, journeying, noticing people, answering doors, offering hospitality, sharing of our goods & listening to others' stories that our happiness & salvation are being worked out – in the ordinary of our lives.
- In Jesus' parables there is a marked absence of the supernatural – they're not pious: Jesus transforms the ordinary & tells us that it is in the theatre of the ordinary that the drama of the kingdom is lived out – the arena where God dwells & into which we are invited.
- By evoking everyday experiences, the parables tell us how we live in his kingdom, or if we reject God's offer, where is it that we stand in life.
- In the parables we are invited to make a judgement & to come to a decision; they invite us to pay attention, come alive & face reality.
- All this can be seen in today's Gospel where Jesus confronts the chief priests & elders of the people.
- He confronts them with a story, a parable which criticises them for being "yes-men" whose easy promises are not matched by their performance.
- He uses a fictitious story to get people to face the problem of religious deception & hypocrisy - the story is of a man who has two sons & who asks them both to work in the vineyard.
- The first son refuses bluntly, "I will not go", but afterwards regrets his decision & changes his mind; the second son agrees politely & readily, "*Certainly, sir*", but his instant consent is not matched by his behaviour: he doesn't turn up; Jesus' question - "*Which of them did the father's will?*", only allows for one answer. Only one son did anything.
- Jesus' own reply identifies who the two sons represent.

- The son who refused but repented stands for the tax collectors, outcasts, prostitutes, those broken by life & rejected by society - marginalised.
- The other son stands for the priests & scribes who maintain the outward appearance of piety but without any real devotion to the will of God.
- Their outward, empty piety, their lip service, is criticised earlier in the Gospel when Jesus says: *"it is not those who say to me, 'Lord, Lord', who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father in heaven."*
- The son whose word was 'no' but whose action became 'yes' is held out to us as the one who did his father's will.
- The story doesn't tell us why he changed his mind or what the change cost him, only that his generosity of spirit had the last word.
- In time he caught up with the best that was in him.
- He was late in doing his father's will, but not too late.
- The message is clear: What God wants is not talk but action, not promises or creeds or confessions, but an openness to respond to the Father who seeks to encounter us in life.
- The scribes are constantly talking about the religious laws, the name of God is constantly on their lips; the temple priests constantly praise God in their prayers & worship; they seem to be doing the will of God; but things are not always as they seem.
- The tax collectors & sinners don't talk about God to anyone, they've often thought that they are not worthy to even be remembered by God.
- Yet, according to Jesus, they will enter the reign of God ahead of the chief priests & scribes.
- What did Jesus see in those men & women, despised by everyone?
- Maybe their humiliation; hearts more open to God as he is; more in need of forgiveness & maybe they were less proud & arrogant.
- It is good for us to see & know that the heart of God goes out to those who are broken – they are open to be healed. Are we open to be healed?
- God, portrayed as the father in the parable, gives room/space for the son to change; an angry father would've berated him & effectively driven him away.
- We may ask ourselves the question - have we missed opportunities to be faithful to God; to be faithful to the call he offers us to be true to ourselves.
- It raises the question for me – do we give people a chance – to either change, or to enable them to reveal who they truly are, or are we hasty in judging them? Who are the rejected ones in our society & in your life; who are the tax collectors, sinners, outcasts we reject & who need to know God's love through us?
- This requires a compassion that can come only from those who themselves have been who broken & healed. Do we really have within us the desire to live the Gospel & put it into practice?