

Jesus said... 'Which of the two did the will of his Father...?' Mt 21.31

Jesus tells a parable about a pair of brothers. A father asked both his sons to work in his vineyard for the day. The first said 'No' to his father but then did what had been asked; the other said 'Yes', but then didn't do it.

We don't know anything about the brothers. We don't know why each of them said what they did, or why each of them ended up doing the opposite. All we know is that each of them had a change of heart. One brother moved from a position of rebellion to one of obedience, while the other moved in the opposite direction. 'Which of the two did the will of his father?' Jesus asks, the one who says or the one who does? There can only be one answer.

It's a simple story, but when we look at the context in which Jesus tells the parable it's easier to see the point St Matthew is trying to make. Jesus is talking to the Chief Priests and elders in the Temple. It's the day after he has entered Jerusalem with excited crowds hailing him as Messiah. It's also the day after he has thrown the money-changers and the traders out of the Temple, insisting that it should be a house of prayer. The Chief Priests are horrified and they question Jesus angrily: by what right is he behaving as if he owns the Temple? He seems to be claiming authority from God.

This is the point where Jesus tells his parable, adding at the end: 'the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.' People are responding to the gospel in different ways, as reflected in the behaviour of the two brothers. Sinners are repenting and turning to God. But those who have worshipped in the Temple and kept up appearances are turning away, refusing to recognise what God is doing in their midst.

The parable does not only present a challenge to the religious leaders of Jesus' day, it challenges us too. On an individual level, we need to make sure that we are responding to Jesus, allowing him to confront us at any point where we have been like the second son and said 'Yes' to God while in fact going off in the other direction. Are we open to the possibility of God doing new things in our lives?

And the parable asks the same questions of the church. How much are we willing to change? Are we prepared to consider whether our traditions and practices are helping people to find God or whether there needs to be renewal? How can we bring the good news of the kingdom to the world? What does it mean to be church in this pandemic? How can we work more closely with others to help our local communities and our nation to get through these difficult times? And looking ahead, what role can we play in helping to rebuild our society for the better?

We pray for discernment in the words of today's collect:

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers
of your people who call upon you;
and grant that they may both perceive and know
what things they ought to do,
and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil them;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord... **Amen.**