

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

There are many factors that influence our perception of things and our response of the will. These factors must be taken into account when we consider our responsibility for what we do and how we act. But there is always a place deep within us, that responds favorably to do something good and just. This response opens us to God and makes us responsible to the truth, goodness and beauty. It makes us believe in the ultimate one who directs our life and our destiny.

Today's readings emphasize that what we do is the real measure of our belief in God. In today's Gospel Jesus reminds us that words do not express the full human response to God, until they are put into practice in each person's life. What is required is the integral response of the whole person: his thoughts, words and actions in total human capability. To draw on a Biblical distinction, our search and openness to the experience of God needs to involve the heart even more than the mind. It is the heart that is the origin of our desires and actions. The heart turns doctrine into action. Matthew's here distinguishes clearly between those considered nominally good and those who actually do well. One son only says he will work and the other does the actual work. Jesus declares that the one who works for his salvation will achieve it.

Today's Gospel parable is clearly directed at the religious and civil leaders of the people in Jesus' time. They spoke much about God and, in particular, how God was to be served by a strict observance of the Law. But it is clear they did not have the spirit that Jesus was communicating through his life and teaching, namely, the spirit of love, compassion, caring and forgiveness for the weak and vulnerable.

They also heard the teaching of Jesus but made no effort to carry it out. They excused themselves by challenging Jesus' legal authority to do what he was doing. Because Jesus did not fit into the parameters of their legal world, they could not classify him and they rejected him. On the other hand, Jesus tells them that the tax collectors are making their way into the kingdom of God before they do. These certainly were not keeping God's Law. They even had said No to his commandments many times. But then they encountered Jesus and they

experienced a radical transformation in their lives. They listened to him and they responded. The chief priests and the elders are like the second son in the story. They say ‘Yes’ to obey God but they do not listen to Jesus, the Son of God.

This parable of the Two Sons is unique to Matthew and many scholars feel that he might have composed it himself to present the situation of the early church. However, we are presented with the actual situation during the time of Jesus regarding the response of the religious groups. It is a straight forward parable and the issue proposed presents clear choices. It opens the mind of the listener and reader to judge what is right: whether it is good to say something you will do and later not do it or to promise someone that you will not do something and later regret the action and do it. In fact both of them seem to be no good sons in their response to their father. Both of them were imperfect. But it is far nobler to change the mind and do good than to remain set in the direction of evil. We are not saved by belonging but by becoming. In our relationship with God actions speak louder than words. Thus in the context of the parable the son who actually did what his father requested fulfilled his father’s will.

An elderly carpenter was ready to retire. He told his employer-contractor of his plans to leave the house-building business and live a more leisurely life with his wife, enjoying his extended family. He would miss the pay check, but he needed to retire. They could get by. The contractor was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a favor. The carpenter said yes, but in time it was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and used inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end a dedicated career.

When the carpenter finished his work the employer came to inspect the house. He handed the front-door key to the carpenter. “This is your house,” he said, “My gift to you!” The carpenter was shocked! What a shame! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently. So it is with us. We build our lives, a day at a time, often putting less than our best into the building. Then with a shock we realize we have to live in the house we have built. If we could do it over, we’d do it much differently. But we cannot go back. Build wisely!