

The Parable that comes at the end of our Gospel reading this morning is one that will ring true to any parent. It tells of a landowner with two sons. He says to each of them in turn; ‘I’ve a job for you – go and work in my vineyard.’

The first one, possibly at a crucial point in a game on his x-Box at the time, tells him to push off. The second one says, ‘Alright Dad, will do.’ but never goes near the place. The first one, later feeling bad about how he treated his father, went, and did what he was asked.

I think all of us, whether as parents or children, can recall times when we could identify with any of these three characters. The resentment at being asked to do something; the hurt at being refused.

Now, as with all of Jesus’ parables, this story is about a lot more than the story. It addresses issues that go to the heart of our walk with God.

In our reading of St Matthew’s Gospel, which we have been following on and off since last November, we have come to a crucial point. This Parable comes after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, during which he had been acclaimed as a Prophet and as Son of David. Then, he had on his arrival in Jerusalem, marched into the Temple and expelled all the traders and money changers.

The religious leaders are furious and demand, ‘By what authority are you doing all this?’ In other words, who do you think you are. Events are now moving swiftly to a climax. Within a week Jesus will be hanging on a cross, humiliated

by his opponents and abandoned by his friend. The crucial questions that lie at the heart of it all are:

‘Who is Jesus of Nazareth?’

‘What authority does he have in our lives?’

These are questions that lie at the heart of our Parable this morning.

What authority does the father have in the life of his two sons? The one who showed him outward respect is the second of the two – but it was the first who actually obeyed him. That links in with Jesus’ teaching towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount as he warned:

‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.  
*Matt 7:21*

Obedience must lie at the heart of discipleship.

As we recall these incidents, Jesus, as he tells his story, invites us to reflect on similar attitudes we may have held, or may indeed hold, in our response to God’s call upon us.

The second son, who in fact agreed to do what the father asked of him – and then not done it, is a symbol of what I might call ‘casual religion’. He was not insincere; he probably intended at the time to obey but there were other things on his mind and the father’s command was kept till later – and later never came.

The Christian faith appeals to our reason. We admire Jesus in his teaching and the cross evokes a response of sympathy and a desire to follow. But today is too soon, the discipline of faith is too hard. So, like the second son, though we have promised to obey, we don't go.

The first son speaks of a different response to religion, to God. He resented his father's call and went his own way. Have we not at some stage resented God's intrusion in our lives; resented his unreasonable demands, the demand to forgive those who have wronged us? Or maybe we have just dismissed the whole concept of God, of faith, as irrelevant, as having no meaning, no significance in our lives. And we have concentrated on what we saw as more important.

Then that first son repented. Maybe when the resentment eased, he looked again at his father's request, and he did as he was asked. It takes courage to admit that you are wrong for pride dies hard.

Like that first son, we too are asked to look again at God's will for our lives; look at the place that we have given him in the scheme of things. This may come at the prompting of a parent, a teacher, or a friend. I will be forever grateful for the promptings of my physics teacher at school to re-examine my view of the world in which God had no place, in which faith was irrelevant. I also remember the gentle support of my mother as I began my own spiritual pilgrimage, as I belatedly followed the path God was calling me along.

What comes across to me in this, as I reflect on the Parable, as I look back on my own spiritual journey, is the importance of being prepared to take a second look at what God is saying to us.

To go back to the wider context of the Parable we read this morning in Matthew's Gospel; Jesus gave this Parable in the context of a deepening dispute with the religious establishment of his day. These were people who saw themselves as being in tune with God – yet whose attitudes and behaviour belied this. They looked down on the tax collectors and sinners of their own day, whom they saw as far from God. Jesus points to their response to John the Baptist and his message. Rejected by the religious establishment, John's message of repentance had been received by the very sinners they had despised. Jesus very clearly identifies these same sinners with the first son who had initially disobeyed his father and had then repented.

Unlike other parables of Jesus, in this instance the door remains open. The second son still had his chance to make good his promise to go and work in the vineyard. The chief priests and elders are not told that the Kingdom of heaven is closed to them; simply that the tax collectors and sinners are going in ahead of them. They still have the chance to listen again to John's message of repentance and take their own place in the Kingdom.

I come back to that theme of 'listen again'. Maybe our life in the faith has lost something of its freshness. Maybe the very familiarity of the well-known Bible stories to us means that they have lost something of their cutting edge. Maybe we have become discouraged or have inwardly dismissed it. The

appeal of Jesus rings down through the ages: ‘Listen again to what I am saying – and enter into that peace that I have prepared for you.’