

Sermon for 27th September 2020 Trinity 16

My mother probably was one of the first to buy a domestic dishwasher for our household. This was a very good thing as I hated having to help with the washing up! I can remember it well. It was enormous, a Colston and sat on top of the work top. It certainly earned its keep and it was one of the first things my mother bought when she started to earn what she called 'her own money'. These after all were the days of housekeeping money given to her by my father and I guess we are talking about the late 60s here. Although we still had to wash pots and pans - the new dishwasher didn't do those so I didn't get out of it altogether! My children mainly did though I think and my recollection is that it was quicker to do things myself rather than spending time and energy at the end of a long day getting them to help.... Funny isn't it how children lose the fascination with washing up once they got past the toddler stage?!

So I have sympathy with the man and also with the two sons in the parable we have in our gospel reading today. Matthew's context is important here because this story is told on what we think of as the first day of Holy Week. The events of the day before, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the overturning of the money changers tables, all this has been tidied up. The fig tree has been cursed and withered on the way and now Jesus is busy teaching away in the Temple and perhaps not surprisingly the chief priests and elders want to know just who Jesus thinks he is. He says he'll tell them if they first tell him who they think John the Baptist was. They won't or rather can't so Jesus doesn't although he could. Instead he tells them a parable about the two sons.

I rather like at least the honesty of the first son. You can just imagine it can't you - "No way, I don't want to! Why do I have to do everything round here? You've ruined my life!" Sound familiar?! Then if it was today he realises actually there is nothing else going on either on the television or on his computer or whatever and decides he may as well go to the vineyard and help out after all. The second child gives a much more respectful and polite answer calling his father 'Sir'. This seems much too easy and what happens? Nothing. The one who seems on the surface to be the most helpful turns out to be the one who is not helpful at all. The question asked 'which of the two sons did the will of his father' answers itself because only one of the two did anything.

This is actually a very challenging parable because in a sense both sons are wrong in their attitude to their father and we may all at times as Christians said one thing which sounds good but done another in practice. It much easier to pay lip service than to really live it.

In the bible study group I lead we have thought about those who are not Christians, who appear to have no belief in anything but are some of the Christ like people we know. They have said no to God and to the church and yet we see them caring for the poor, listening to others, welcoming strangers and genuinely loving their neighbours. Meanwhile in churches among those who profess Jesus as Lord and who claim to know the grace of God in their lives we can find behaviour that is anything but Christ like! So although both sons in the parable were wrong the thing is that what separates them is that the first one was willing to admit it and do something about it. The text says 'he changed his mind and went'. But the Greek word used here is much more than changing your mind. It's deeper, more like a change of heart. He realised that he was wrong. The direction of his heart moved from doing what he wanted to do, to doing what his father wanted.

Hence Jesus drives his point home even harder when he tells the religious leaders that instead of them leading the way into the kingdom of God it would be those who they looked down upon in society, the most despised, tax collectors and sinners. They were the ones who responded to John the Baptist and believed in his righteousness. The leaders were the ones who saw also but did nothing about it. Note though that it doesn't say that these religious leaders and elders would not enter the kingdom of God but that it would be the lesser ones in the world's eyes who would be ahead of them. God seeks our hearts and our lives, not just our words. God's love is inclusive and Jesus stresses both forgiveness and acceptance to the prostitutes and tax collectors. He didn't accept their sinful ways of living but yet was willing to meet them, talk to them with respect and even eat with them.

And so Jesus challenges assumptions about authority with an example of humility - the son who changes his mind and admits he was wrong. And its difficult to admit we are wrong isn't it? And whose authority are we talking about? Paul puts it like this 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.'

Even though Jesus had all the authority of God, he did not exploit it, he didn't maximise its uses for pointless gains. Instead he emptied himself of divinity and took on our humanity. Not out of convenience but out of obedience. And then the turning point: after the emptying comes the filling, after submitting to authority comes the bearing of authority, ultimate authority, after going down so followed a rising up. 'Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that

at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'

And so if we are prepared to empty ourselves, to put ourselves aside, or in today's parlance, to get over ourselves, then God can be at work in us, filling us with his love and his grace and desire to do his will and then we too will be able to bend the knee and say truthfully and from the heart that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.