



A 'NO' THAT BECOMES A 'YES' AND A 'YES' THAT BECOMES A 'NO'

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells this parable:

What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.

The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

Which of the two did the will of his father?"

The said, "The first."

Reflecting on the above scripture and the one below, John Shea writes:

This is a classic ploy of the prophet. He tells a story and asks his listeners to make a judgment, to evaluate the characters in the story. They are usually quick to respond for they are people with firm opinions and unyielding judgments. What they do not know is that by judging the people in the story they are judging themselves. They are more involved than they think.

The religious leaders value action over words. Mere lip service to the Father is not following his will. Actually doing what the Father commands is obedience to his will. Therefore, it is the first son who did the will of the father.

But this son also changed his mind. If they endorse *doing* over *saying*, they also have to endorse the change of mind that brought the first son to obedient action. It is this ability to change one's mind that Jesus wants to emphasize. Both John the Baptist and Jesus have stressed that *metanoia*—a change of mind—is needed to enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

By profession the chief priests and elders of the people are expected to be close to God and, by the profession, tax collectors and prostitutes are thought to be far from God. But what is thought to be far from God is "going into the kingdom of God ahead of "what is thought to be close to God. The reason is: when tax collectors and sinners heard John, they repented. They changed their minds and began to live in a new way. But

the chief priests and elders did not change their minds, even though they knew that John was righteous. Something kept them from believing in John, possibly John's insistence that they had to think in a new way.

The problem is profound; their recalcitrance is deep. They might have been against John at the beginning. But when they saw that John's preaching had the power to convert sinners, to lead them into the ways of righteousness, they should have rethought their position. They are supposed to urge repentance. But when they would not support John in his important work, they abdicated their responsibilities as religious leaders.

Yet there is no doubt that repenting and leading a life of righteousness is doing God's will. This is what the first son does and what they themselves commended. However, they are the second son. They say that they will do God's will, but they do not actually do it. They are known to be righteous because of what they say with their lips, "Yes, Father." But they are not actually righteous because they do not carry out what they say. Their endorsement of the first son is a judgment on themselves. They are the second son, and their real failure is that they cannot change their mind.

Reflecting on today's Gospel Fr. Dennis McBride writes:

One of the interesting points that emerges from the Gospel is how Jesus does so much of his teaching through storytelling. Paradoxically, Jesus communicates his most telling truths through the medium of fiction. He invites his hearers to use their imagination and follow him into the world of parable. The truth of Jesus' parables does not depend on whether the tales told actually happened—that is not their claim on the hearer; rather, their claim to truth depends on whether they catch something of the unseen reality of the kingdom, or whether they disclose unrecognized truths about people's commitment to God and their relationship 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 travelers, callous judges, awkward neighbours, selfish hosts, good employers, searching housewives, broken families, warring kings, surprised guests, wise and foolish bridesmaids. The point

of the parables is not that they make interesting illustrations; the stories tell us it is at the level of our eating, drinking, sleeping, forgiving, choosing, reaching out, journeying, noticing people, answering doors, offering hospitality, sharing bread and listening to midnight stories that our happiness and salvation are being worked out.

In Jesus' parables there is a marked absence of the supernatural; Jesus baptizes the ordinary and tells us that it is in the theatre of the ordinary that the drama of the kingdom is lived out. By evoking everyday experience, the parables tells us that we are saved where we are. In the parables we are invited to make a judgment and to come to a decision; they invite us to pay attention, come alive and face things.

Promise and performance

All this can be seen in today's Gospel where Jesus confronts the chief priests and elders of the people. He confronts them with a story, a parable which criticizes them for being "yes-men" whose easy promises are not matched by their performance. Fiction is used to face this problem of religious deception. The story is told of a man who has two sons and who asks them both to work in the vineyard. The first son refuses bluntly, "I will not go," but afterwards regrets his decision and changes his mind. The second son agrees politely and readily. "Certainly, sir", but his instant consent is not matched by his behavior: 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 the two sons. The son who refused but repented stands for the tax collectors and prostitutes who complied with God's requests set forth in the Baptist's preaching. The other son stands for the priests and scribes who maintain the outward appearance of piety but without any real devotion to the will of God. They did not trust the Baptist, even when they saw the testimony of the changed lives of the tax collectors and prostitutes. Their outward piety, unsupported by obedience to God, is criticized 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 the person who does the will of my Father in heaven." (7:12)

"Late have I loved Thee"

The son whose word was 'no' but whose actions 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 this 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.

That son had a real counterpart in St. Augustine, whose early life was a blunt refusal to follow the Gospel

his mother had held out to him. In his *Confessions* he admits his sexual exploits—from the age of seventeen he had a mistress who bore him a son. The Gospels he regarded as fit only for simple minds; he hunted elsewhere for truth. In time—when he was thirty-two—he caught up with the best in himself and his 'no' turned into a committed 'yes'. The son who eventually said 'yes' reflected on his late decision when he wrote:

"Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved Thee!...Thou didst call and cry out and burst in upon my deafness; Thou didst shine forth and glow and drive away my blindness; Thou didst send forth Thy fragrance, and I drew in my breath, and not I pant for Thee; I have tasted, and now I hunger and thirst; Thou didst touch me, and I was inflamed with desire for Thy peace."

(End of Fr. McBride's reflection)

Is there a danger our 'yes' could become a 'no'?

All of you reading this column have at some stage said 'yes' to God. The 'yes' may have been a strong one or not so strong. Is there a danger that while on the surface we may seem to be still saying 'yes' to God, on a deeper level our 'yes' may be weakening and going cold? I think that this is a distinct possibility. What might be signs of a weakening 'yes'?

- Prayer is neglected or becomes very routine. We say prayers but don't really pray. We don't really open our hearts to God. We don't seek his Will when it comes to decisions.
- Our lives are self-centered. The Christian, life is *not* about us. It is about seeking God and his will. It is about sharing our gifts of time, treasure and talent to be service to others. If retired and healthy what are we doing to be of service to our parish or wider community?
- Participation in the Mass. Another sign of a weakening 'yes' is the way in which we participate in the Mass. Our body is present, but our mind and heart is not engaged in the Mass. We don't sing. We don't show hospitality to those around us. We don't open our hearts to being touched and challenged by the readings or homily. We receive communion in a very routine way. We may even leave early because we don't want to be delayed in the parking lot.

Religious practice is a lot like marriage or a fire. If they are not attended to they gradually weaken or die.

Have a great week,

