



**A 'Yes' that becomes a 'No'
and
a 'No' that becomes a 'Yes'**

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 changed his mind and went. The father went to the other son and said the same. He answered, 'I will go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, 'The first.'"

*Fr. Denis McBride is an English Redemptorist priest whose book *Seasons of the Word* is a wonderful set of reflections on the Sunday readings for all three cycles. Before reflecting on this Sunday's reading, he does a very nice piece on the parables, Jesus' favorite way to teach a lesson. Fr. Dennis 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 parables. 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 tell 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 action 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 now 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)

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

I assume that many of you 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? What might be signs of a weakening 'yes'?

- Prayer is neglected or becomes very routine. We say prayers but do not really entreat God. We don't 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 but about seeking God and his will. It calls us to share our gifts of time, treasure and talent to be of service to others. If retired and healthy, what are we doing to be of service to our parish or wider community?
- We go to Mass but our minds and hearts are not engaged in the celebration of the liturgy. 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 matter-of-fact 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 friendship; if not attended to, it would gradually weaken or die.

Jay Cormier writes:

A seven-year-old girl came to Sunday School faithfully each week. Her parents would drop her off, but did not

stay for church. They would return an hour later to pick her up or would arrange with a friend's family to bring her home.

Dad was vice president of sales for a local company and was considered a "comer" in the firm; Mom was in real estate and was always juggling several deals. The couple's Saturday night parties were the stuff of legend in the community—always the right people were there, food and drink were plentiful, and it was a lot of fun—fun that got louder and rougher as the night went on.

One Sunday morning, the pastor saw the daughter in church—and, to his shock, sitting next to her were her parents. The pastor spoke to them after church and tried to ask, as diplomatically as he could. What prompted this?

The parents explained what had happened the night before at their party.

"It got a little loud, it got a little rough, and there was too much drinking. The noise woke up our daughter and she came downstairs to the third step. She saw that we were eating and drinking, and she said 'Oh, can I say the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Good night, everybody.' And she went back upstairs. Then people started to leave. 'Oh my, look at the hours, we've got to be going.' 'We've stayed way too long.' Within two minutes the room was empty."

Mom and Dad began cleaning up, picking up crumpled napkins and half-eaten food and gathering up the empty glasses and dirty dishes. And with two trays, he and she met on either side of the sink—they looked at each other, and he expressed what both were thinking: "Where do we think we're going?"

Jesus' simple story of the two sons takes the Gospel out of the realm of the "theoretical" and places the mercy of God into the midst of our busy, complicated everyday lives. Compassion, forgiveness and mercy are only words until our actions give full expression to those values in our relationship with others; our identifying ourselves as Christians and calling ourselves disciples of Jesus mean nothing until our lives express that identity in the values we uphold and the beliefs we live. Discipleship requires us to embrace the Gospel not as an unattainable ideal but as attitude and perspective for approaching our world, a compass that guides us on our journey to life's fulfillment in God.

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Have a blessed week,

