Homily – 26th Sunday in Ord. Time (A)

Ez. 18: 25-28; Phil. 2: 1-11 & Mt. 21: 28-32

That little passage from Matthew’s Gospel seems deceptively simple. Jesus takes a very commonplace story of two boys and their response to their father’s command – the one seemingly defiant but then responsive, the other seemingly cooperative but ultimately disobedient. It is, I am sure, a very familiar scenario. Anyone who has been a parent or a schoolteacher will recognise it instantly – and, dare I say it, a moment’s reflection will probably bring to mind many episodes in our own lives where we have taken both paths, followed the example of both those boys. The answer to Jesus’ simple question: ‘Which one did the father’s will?’ is blindingly obvious.

But, of course, Jesus does not leave the matter there. Rather, he uses a very typically rabbinic “trick” and makes that very simple story the “platform” as it were for a deeper teaching. He accuses his hearers of ignoring John the Baptist’s example and teaching on repentance, whilst the notorious “sinners” – tax collectors and prostitutes – followed John’s way of “metanoia” and so are on the way to the kingdom. And even seeing that miracle, the amazing conversion of such sinners, his hearers did not think twice, did not follow the example of the first boy, did not think better of things and obey.

And perhaps what makes this little story so startling is where and when Jesus tells it, and to whom. One of the difficulties of hearing the gospels Sunday by Sunday, almost disconnected from their place in the overall narrative, is that we can forget where they “fit” as it were. In fact, although in some ways Jesus could have told this parable at almost any point, he is speaking on what we would now think of as the Monday of Holy Week. The previous day he had entered Jerusalem in triumph, and then immediately driven the money-changers out of the Temple. He goes back the next day and is immediately met by a delegation of the Chief Priests and Elders, who cross-examine him about his authority for the previous day’s “disruptive behaviour”. It is that questioning, and the Chief priests’ cowardly response to Jesus’ question about John’s authority to baptise that triggers this little tale, and Jesus’ very pointed condemnation of their hardness of heart. As with the other “two brother” stories in the Gospels, there is the very strong implication that Israel has become complacent, too self-satisfied in their status as “children of God” – they see only in black and white, *they* are the “good guys” and everyone else is wrong. They have forgotten that God is rarely “black and white”, forgotten that *all* human beings are his children – and even when they seem defiant, there is still room to “think better of things”. Israel had forgotten that their special “sonship” was a gift, not a birthright – and perhaps that is a lesson for us too, we who call ourselves the “new” Israel, the “new” children of God.

We see very much the same lesson in that first reading from Ezekiel. Again, Israel wants to see in black and white – good guys are good and get rewarded, bad guys are bad and get punished – you just have to be on the “right side”. Yet the Lord rejects that view. Rather, each person has the choice before God to do good or evil, and each has the choice to “change sides” – to set aside good actions, to renounce former evil ways – each has the chance to “choose life”. In a black and white world, there is no room for mercy – but our God has not given us a black and white world.

In a sense, our three readings today make up a surprising “triptych”. I say surprising, because – for once – it is not the gospel which makes up the centre panel. Rather, Jesus’ little story about the brothers and the passage from Ezekiel are like the wings, they reflect each other, they echo each other – but in a way, they only truly make sense when that “centre panel” from Philippians is in place. For there, in that great “hymn”, we see the mercy of God made visible – not in black and white – but in all its technicolour glory. There we see the mercy of God made visible in Christ, the God who empties himself utterly for the sake of mankind, for the sake of our salvation. There we see the mercy of God made visible in both the torment and agony of the Cross, and in the super-exaltation of the Resurrection of Jesus.

Over the summer, I led two retreats for Benedictine communities in Sri Lanka. In the second monastery in Kandy, there were 35-40 monks attending, which meant we had to use the large conference room in their guest house. On the staircase leading to the room was a huge reproduction – probably some 20ft tall by 15ft wide – of Dali’s well-known masterpiece “Christ of St John of the Cross”, beautifully painted by a local artist. It was the first thing you saw as you entered the guesthouse – it quite literally filled your vision. For me, it was quite a potent reminder of my task as retreat-giver – passing it before and after each conference made me reflect that the whole purpose of my being there was to help lead my fellow monks to Christ, it was nothing to do with me, or my wisdom, or my oratory.

And it is that same vision of the self-emptying Christ that fills our view this morning. He alone is our model, as Paul says: ‘Have that mind in you that was in Christ Jesus... be united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind’. He is our model of obedience – but an obedience rooted, not in slavishness or in fear, but in love both for his Father’s plan for salvation and in his love for each one of us. He alone is the one who can show us the truth of that statement in our Opening Prayer this morning – that God’s almighty power is shown most clearly in his gifts of pardon and mercy – and may he bring us all together to everlasting life. Amen.

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30.9.17

Bidding Prayers – Sunday 26 (A)

*Intro: Fr O*

*R:* Let us pray for Francis our Pope and Bernard our Bishop, and all those who hold a ministry of service in the Church:

May they continue to proclaim with boldness the self-emptying love of Christ who shows us the mercy of God.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for God’s blessing on St Benet’s Hall:

As we begin this new academic year today, may the Holy Spirit overshadow all who teach, study and serve here, helping us to build together a community dedicated to study and to truth.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all who worship in this place:

May this house of God be a place of peace, of prayer and of communion with the loving God for all who seek him here. May He make us of one mind, one heart and one voice in our service and worship.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all those who are sick in mind or body, for the homeless and the unemployed, for the disabled and the aged, and for all those in special need. May Christ, who gave his all for our salvation, be close to all those in trouble or distress.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for a few moments in a silence: Lord, in your mercy...

Let us join these and all our prayers to those of Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of Monks, as we say: *Hail Mary...*

*Prayer: Fr O*