

Christ Church, Clermont-Ferrand

28 September 2008

Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus said, "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?" They said, "The first." 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."

To place this parable in its context, it occurs during a bitter controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees about the value of John the Baptist's ministry. The parable of Jesus seems simple enough: if you agreed to do something that you know you should do, but do not in fact accomplish it, you are much worse off than the one who says, "I won't do it," but later changes his mind. The Lord uses this simple truth to upbraid the outwardly religious people of his day. They, the upright, did not believe John the Baptist, while the "sex workers" and collaborators with the enemy did. Even after they saw the conversions of these people, even after they recognized changed lives—people who had gotten new hearts, new spirits, in Ezekiel's words.

Well, we are not here arguing about the Baptist. Nevertheless, I think we can relate this passage to ourselves. Whenever I hear this parable, it seems to me that both sons live in me. There is the Pierre who knows what needs doing and who doesn't do it. And there is the Pierre who argues with God for years and then finally does what needs doing anyway.

It seems to me that everyone understands that I do not always do the right thing even when I have agreed to do it. That's pretty ordinary. What is more interesting is that sometimes I end up doing what I should do even after I have said I will not. How did I end up "doing the will of my Father"? I mean, I never intended to become Bishop in Europe! How'd I get here?

We talk a lot about free will. Indeed, we do have some range of choices in life. And it often seems to us that we are choosing to follow Jesus. And yet, even after we say we are, even after we do so for a time, we end up at least sometimes speaking and acting as if we'd never heard of Jesus. But how in fact did we end up following Jesus?

The Spirit of the living God has this amazing ability to move in us, through us and beyond us, all without violating our free will. The first son in Jesus' parable said he wouldn't go work in the vineyard, but he went anyway. Jesus doesn't tell us how that came about. It just did. And how did those prostitutes and tax collectors have a change of heart? They just did.

Today we are witnessing an important moment in the lives of Kathy and David Marker, who are being confirmed. And their daughter Alison, who is sponsoring

them! (How wonderful to have the child present the parents.) You and I will see and hear these two people reaffirming their faith in Christ and their rejection of evil. For this is what Confirmation is all about—a mature public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ before you and me and the whole communion of saints on earth and in heaven.

And yes, of course, it also means they are becoming Episcopalians. You all know you don't have to be Episcopalian to go to heaven...but if you are one, you'll know which fork to use at the heavenly banquet!

We can see and hear what the Spirit is doing in the Markers' lives. They are witnesses to us. We can choose to think that something has happened only to them and not to us, like the Pharisees who saw the conversions of others but didn't think they mattered to them. They and we see the action of the Spirit, and it demands a decision from us as well. Maybe we have been saying "No" all this time in our hearts. Maybe today the Spirit will move to change your No to your Yes. If so, as always, we will wonder just how did we get here...

Finally, my friends, I do not think I will ever be without the two Pierres in me, the one who says yes and doesn't, the one who says no and ends up doing anyway. All of us have this struggle, in one way or another. But it helps me to know that the Spirit of the living God will not let me go, even when I do. Conversion is a daily affair. But even if you are just beginning, it truly is, as the Markers can tell you, only the beginning of the greatest adventure you will ever have.