

Twenty-Sixth Third Sunday in Ordinary Time A2023

Let me start this homily with some statements: The conversion of heart is an important de the flourishing of our relationship with God. The growth of our relationships with God depends on our capacity to repent of our sins and to return to him. Anytime someone changes his heart by leaving behind him his old ways of life and by striving to do God's will, he is loved by God and pleasing to him. Conversion, then, means to leave sins behind, to obey God and to do his will. The question of change of heart and obedience to God by doing his will is the may focus of today's Gospel as exemplified in in the parable of the two sons.

The first son said "no" to the request of his father, but afterwards he changed his mind and went to help him in the vineyard. The second said "yes" to the request of his father, but afterwards he did not fulfill his pledge to help him. As presented, the parable raises the question of who in reality, among the two sons, fulfilled the will of his father.

The real context of this parable refers to the history of salvation. The Jews have been the first to hear the word of God and to accept his Covenant. However, instead of being faithful until the end, they abandoned his ways and behaved continually in an unlawful way vis-à-vis God. Even when our Lord Jesus came as the fulfillment of the promise made to their forefathers, they refused to believe in him. In the parable, the Jews represent the first son who said primarily "yes" to his father, but did not follow up by fulfilling his will and going to help him in the vineyard.

The pagans, on the contrary, although they first rejected God's Covenant, once they heard the word of our Lord Jesus, they changed their lives and minds and believed in God. They represent, in the parable, the second son who, primarily said "no" to the request of his father, but later had a second thought and, in the end, went to help him. Such people, like the tax collectors and prostitutes, for having changed their lives and minds have the right to enter God's kingdom at the exclusion of the first comers who did not care about God's Covenant and the law until the end.

When our Lord says that, even the prostitutes are going to enter the Kingdom of God before you, he is not idealizing prostitution as though it is a normal state of life. He is just making a comparison with regard to the gravity of the sin of those who stubbornly reject him and the truth he represents. Prostitution remains forever a grave sin and a degrading situation that reduces women to the rank of object of sex.

It would be a mistake to anyone to use such a text of the Gospel by becoming less attentive to the degrading character of prostitution, which today has become a plague in our society. Moreover, our Lord had too much respect for women to not suffer beforehand for what they would become if they were reduced to this state. What our Lord appreciates in the prostitute is not her way of life, but her capacity to change and to put her ability to love in the service of the good at the example of Mary Magdalene.

The parable of the two sons is a warning against complacency and an expression of the ways people react to God's message. It shows that there are two types of people before the word of God: the "yes sir" people who are always excited for anything, but who fail to fulfill their commitment before God. There are also those people who say "no" in the

first place, but when touched by God's grace, repent and come to the obedience of faith.

The parable also contrasts two main attitudes we find among Christians, namely formalism and repentance. The formalism is characteristic of the Pharisees, and those who act like them. They are always there to criticize our Lord for his openness to the tax collectors and the sinners, like prostitutes. Formalism is a kind of cover-up because everything is done for the show up and the appearance without any genuine commitment to God. Repentance, on the contrary is an expression of human openness and realism, for it recognizes that human life being a long journey, there is always a possibility that someone may change the course of his life all the way. Openness refuses to lock someone in his faults and past; it believes patiently in the possibility of conversion.

The story of the two sons reflects the dichotomy between promise and act, words and deeds, appearance and honesty. The first son keeps the appearance; he wants to appear as a good son by saying to his father that he will honor him in going to work for him. But, in truth, he has excuses; his heart is not there. He has serious business to take care of than to help his father in need. After having offered him a good face by saying "yes", he does not go to help him.

The other son, on the contrary, in an act of rebellion has refused to obey his father. But, he has a good heart and feels remorse for having been a bad boy. In a move of second thought, he makes amend and goes to help the father. His late change of mind makes him honor the request of his father.

By giving this parable, our Lord wants to tell us that true worship of God is not that of the show and appearance, but that which tries to do the will of God. Any promise, as beautiful, as it might be, can never replace our acts. Our fine words will never replace our deeds. The son who said that he would go help his father was certainly polite. But, any courtesy that does not get beyond words is in some way hypocrisy. Our Lord teaches us that being Christian is, first of all, being able to be obedient to God's word and act on it and not simply a matter of promise. The failure to live up to the full promise made to God can cost us eternal salvation, while the conversion of heart is a guaranty for the reception of eternal life.

Ezekiel 18: 25-28; Philippians 2: 1-11; Matthew 21: 28-32



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