

Sermon on Sunday 1 October 2023

by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Readings: Philippians 2. 1-11 & Matthew 21. 23-32)

A tale of two sons

It's hard to believe, I know, but growing up, I was the most unbelievably stubborn child; strong-willed, headstrong; 'thran', as the Irish would say.

If someone told me what to do, I'd dig my heels in and refuse. As kids, my older brother and I were as stubborn as each other; arch-rivals, in fact, each refusing to back down in an argument. And many a stand-off took place involving words, fists and, on one occasion, a pitch fork! He survived.

Our parable today is the tale of two miscreant brothers. We're not told if they were rivals like my brother and I, but we do know that they were both equally disrespectful towards their father, unforgiveable in Middle Eastern culture.

The story goes that when asked by their dad to work a shift in the family vineyard, the first son says a defiant 'no'. Later, however, he has a change of heart and does what his father asked.

The second son says, 'Yeah, OK dad'. And either he's lying or later he changes his mind. Whatever, he doesn't go.

It's a very human and relatable snapshot of family life but as a parable of course, it has other layers of meaning. And to understand any parable, we have to ask at least two questions; what's the context, i.e., what was Jesus trying to say to his first audience? And secondly, what might he be saying to this audience, to you and to me?

At the time, the parable was actually an attempt to silence his critics; a demolition job on some religious leaders who were questioning his authority. After all, he'd just ridden brazenly into Jerusalem on a donkey giving off definite Messiah vibes. And then he proceeded to ransack the temple, the house of God, the seat of the religious hierarchy. How dare he? Who did this upstart rabbi think he was? So, they confronted him; 'What gives you the right to do these things?' they ask, 'By what authority?'

Now Jesus isn't in the mood for playing ball. Instead, he asks one of his killer questions: 'I'll answer you,' he says, 'if you can answer me: By what authority did John (the Baptist) baptise?'

Clever. You see, if they answered 'by God's authority', then Jesus could say, well why then didn't you listen to him? And if they answered 'by his own', then the crowds, who believed John to be a prophet, might just lynch them.

It's at this point that Jesus tells his story. Two sons and two different responses to the call of a heavenly Father to engage with his work in the vineyard (often, in the Bible, shorthand for Israel, or indeed the Kingdom of God).

One son (identified as the 'tax collectors and prostitutes' – again shorthand for the non-religious, the undesirable, the unwelcome) says no, but then has a change of heart, is converted and ends up being the one who does the Father's will.

The other son (the 'faithful' and religious elite, i.e., those he's talking to) says yes to the call, but actually doesn't follow through.

And so, the religious leaders leave with their tail firmly between their legs, to wait for another opportunity to finally silence this problem.

So, what might this parable have to say to us here, 2000 or so years later?

Well, maybe, a better question is to ask, 'Do we see ourselves in this story?'

I know I do. There's that stubborn trait of the first son that still lives within me, a rebelliousness. There's also the hypocrisy of the second son.

I project an image of a good, faithful, religious guy who advises others to say yes to the call of our heavenly father. But how often do I myself respond to that call? My life, perhaps like yours, has many disconnects and contradictions.

I can also identify with the religious leaders. I know I can be sanctimonious; my take on religion has many blind spots.

But, where are you?

We're not told the reaction of the father in the story. He had every right to be mad as hell with his offspring. We have to look at a sister parable, again of two sons and a father, to discover that the Father's patience and forgiveness and grace is limitless both to the prodigal and to the jealous son alike.

There's another question within this parable. What authority does Jesus have within our lives? What authority does his story, his example, his challenge carry for us? Are they central to the life we're living, or periphery at best?

In that beautiful early hymn, we heard earlier from the letter to the Philippians, we're reminded of the extraordinary humility of this Jesus, a humility that is our example. And it takes humility, it takes guts, to set aside our own agendas to follow Christ's.

Do we need, as those crowds on that first Palm Sunday did, to welcome him, to give him centre place within our lives, our decisions, our choices, our living?

And do we need to allow him to ransack areas of our lives that need disturbing, rearranging; areas previously out of bounds to his authority; those contradictions, that disobedience, that stubbornness?

We were each designed to function best when we allow Christ to have authority within our lives. When we seek his will, his way, we are responding to our factory setting. It's when we allow other authorities to govern our lives that we fail our potential.

Christ calls us each to work faithfully in our small corner in his vineyard; to sow kindness, nurture tenderness and compassion, reap justice. And, as we do, may our attitude be as that of the same Christ, who humbled himself, taking the very nature of a servant, to lift us all to our rightful place as sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father.

