

26 Sunday Ordinary Time

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people:
"What is your opinion?
A man had two sons.
He came to the first and said,
'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.'
He said in reply, 'I will not,'
but afterwards changed his mind and went.
The man came to the other son and gave the same order.
He said in reply, 'Yes, sir,' but did not go.
Which of the two did his father's will?"
They answered, "The first."
Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you,
tax collectors and prostitutes
are entering the kingdom of God before you.
When John came to you in the way of righteousness,
you did not believe him;
but tax collectors and prostitutes did.
Yet even when you saw that,
you did not later change your minds and believe him."

Mt 21:28-32

"The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you." There are so many things that sound wrong to our ears in this sentence: the judgmental attitude toward the sinners, the comparison that is supposed to be offensive, and the worst of them all is that this whole story is meant to hurt.

Jesus hurting people? Yes, that's exactly what I mean. And you will see it for yourself, if you look at who is the audience of our Lord.

Christ is speaking to the chief priests and the elders of the people. This is not a randomly gathered crowd that stopped in the middle of the street to hear a fiery prophet. This is not a noisy and depressed crowd of the poor and the sick, fascinated by a new preacher. Jesus is speaking to the elite of the society, the cream of the crop. "The chief priests and the elders of the people."

The pop-culture-trained part of me wants to see in them nothing but cynical, calculating political players. That would create an emotionally satisfying narrative about the evil in politics. But as it is always in the case of simplistic emotional stories, that would not tell us the truth about the elite of Israel.

The chief priests and the elders of the people did not get there by being empty and cynical. There must have been some greatness in them, some sort of nobility, some expectation of honor and high ideals. Let's not forget also that their present position in life must have been preceded by lots of discernment of the will of God and attempt to respond to his calling. The echo of the great tradition of God guiding his people out of Egypt to the promised land must have been present, even in the darkest of their hearts.

“The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering before you.” These words hurt because they are thrown in the face of love. Wounded, weakened, sometimes betrayed, but love. Love that lost its way. We see a powerful, sad tension between Jesus and his audience, because we realize that that level of sadness and pain can only happen in the family, between the Father and his children.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes become a symbol, a point of reference, a dramatic example that often appears in the toughest of the family fights, some element that is screamed to mark how bad things are between us.

The simple story about two sons leads us to a gentle contradiction: the son who didn't want to go to the vineyard but changed his mind is the one who fulfills the will of the father. This leaves the highest echelon of Israel with a very powerful question: Do you even know what is it that the sinners do and that you forgot? Do you recognize their desperate passion and dramatic search for God's forgiveness? Do you see how their whole lives, whole persons thirst for God's presence? It was that passion and that intensity of search that was supposed to be your daily experience, something that was promised to you by the Creator, and something that you forgot.

The son who changed his mind because he remembered the father becomes a patron saint of the true obedience. And it hurts. Because the chief priests and the elders find themselves in the position where that kind of change of mind and that kind of change of direction seem already impossible.

The voice of the Father speaking through the Son to their difficult children reveals an additional layer in the story. The Father is not mocking the leaders of his people. He is not screaming at them, he is not threatening them. He is begging. I can almost see the tears in his eyes when he is speaking to his children. Don't you see that? Don't you see that you abandoned the love of your youth? The Father's tears are also an invitation: Please, change your mind now! Come to the vineyard!

Forget the sins of the past, forget your suspicion and pride. Forget everything that would make you hate your own inheritance, no matter how much you feel you've been betrayed or overlooked, no matter how deep is your bitterness. Come to the love of the Father!

Don't be afraid. Even when you feel that things went too far, that you did too much, that you crossed the line, that you passed the point of no return, that you abused yourself and others beyond possibility of forgiveness. Even when you have those thoughts, come back to the Father!

Look! “The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you.” The offense becomes a blessing. The hurt inflicted by God becomes a healing.

If the Father opens the kingdom of heaven to the prostitutes and tax collectors, why would He not open it for you?