

Reflection for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Ezekiel 18:25-28
Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
Phillipians 2:1-11
Matthew 21:28-32

The Power of Conversion

The Greek word for conversion is *metanoia*, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “a change in one’s way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion”. *Metanoia* requires a literal *turning away* from one thing and a *turning towards* another. This is what we are called to do in today’s readings.

The prophet Ezekiel shatters the conventional worldview of sixth-century B.C. Israel. Earlier in chapter 18, the Lord tells Ezekiel that children will no longer be able to ride the coattails of their parents’ virtue to eternal life and parents will no longer suffer eternal punishment for the sins of their children. “The life of every person belongs to me,” says the Lord (Ez. 18:4). The individual will live or die on his own merits. Ezekiel tells us that the virtuous person who “turns away from virtue to commit iniquity” will die because of his iniquity (v. 26), but “if he turns from the wickedness he has committed, and does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life” (v. 27). The power of *metanoia*: Will we turn away from death and turn towards life?

Saint Paul challenges the Philippians to see themselves as part of a larger whole, the Body of Christ, where one person’s actions have ramifications for the entire community. “Do nothing out of selfishness or vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others” (Phil 2:4). Our model in this endeavor is Christ himself, who is exalted through humility and obedience. Later in the chapter, Paul urges the Philippians to “do everything without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (vv. 14-15). Like the Israelites who heard Ezekiel’s prophecy, the individual Philippian has the power to effect change by the way he chooses to live. The power of *metanoia*: Will we turn away from the selfishness of individualism and turn towards our neighbors and God in love?

We hear from Jesus himself in the Gospel about the power of *metanoia*. The son who at first rejects his father's command but later changes his mind, ultimately does his father's will. Jesus exposes the shortcomings of the chief priests and the elders who are witnessing the *metanoia* of tax collectors and prostitutes but are resisting the power of conversion in their own lives. The placement of this parable in Matthew's Gospel underscores its urgency. Jesus shares this parable after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Mt. 21:1-11). The time is at hand for the chief priests and elders to make a decision. They cannot afford to hedge their bets as they did when Jesus asked them whether John's baptism was of heavenly or human origin (v. 25). They must make a choice - which kind of son will they be? Will they die in iniquity, or will they find exaltation by embracing humility in obedience? The power of *metanoia*: Will we turn away from the righteousness of our own opinions and turn towards the Kingdom of God?

Questions

1. Do you think we still face the problems of ancient Israel that Ezekiel describes? If so, what are some ways that we can turn away from evil and preserve our lives?
2. How are we answering St. Paul's call to see others as more important than ourselves and look out for the interests of others? Is this easier or more difficult to do in the age of COVID-19?
3. The chief priests and elders stood to lose a lot (societal status, the primacy of the Jewish Law) if they turned towards the Kingdom of God as Jesus preached it. Was their choice arguably more difficult than the choice of the tax collectors and prostitutes? If so, should we have sympathy for their plight?