

Year A Proper 21
Exodus 17.1-7; Philippians 2.1-13; Matthew 21.23-32

Do as I say, not as I do. This is NOT the message for today!

Doubtless when you were young(er), some finger-wagging adult will have said to you, when you forgot yet again to do something you'd been asked me to do, 'The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.' Maybe you've said it you your own children! That's one message that comes from the second half of today's gospel. We hear Jesus telling us a story in which he compares the son who said 'no' to his father's request, and then changed his mind, to the son who said yes, but did not follow through.

The moral of the story, you could say, is that what we do matters more than what we say we'll do, especially if we have no intention of doing it.

This flies in the face of so much of our daily living when we say things we've no intention of doing simply in order to shut people up. We say what we don't mean so as not to offend, or so as to make people think well of us. Some people call this *charm*. Some people call it *lying* – and indeed the boundary between being charming and lying is blurred.

Jesus makes it clear that he is on the side of the son who says no, and then thinks better and does as he is asked. He does this in a way that was probably quite shocking to his hearers. In first century Palestine, Jewish traditions then—as now—placed great weight on the honour due to parents. So for Jesus to side with a young man who said 'no' to his *father* would have been very shocking. And yet Jesus still sided with that cheeky young man.

For me, the important thing is not that the young man cheeked his father, but that he thought better of what he said and changed his behaviour. He said 'no' then thought better of it.

The jargon word for this is *repentance*. It has nothing to do with grovelling, but everything to do with turning to face in another direction. Turning from one action or direction of movement to face another way. That is what the son who said 'no' is doing. He turned from 'no' to acquiescence and 'yes'. He was prepared to change his mind, to lose face, we might say, and do the right thing.

Time and again in the Gospel Jesus asked his followers to do exactly that. Never mind the mistakes you have made in the past—acknowledge them, and move on. That is what the confession is all about. As today's reading tells us, John Baptist – to whom this church is dedicated – gives the same message. John was a no-nonsense character who was not afraid to offend people. Straightforward, open, in your face, offensive. Jesus himself from time to time shared those characteristics as he called people to see things differently: he comforted the disturbed certainly, but he disturbed the comfortable, as we heard today.

The Pharisees were the comfortable people—religious rigorists, who wanted everyone to keep the law of Moses - nothing wrong in that, of course, but they tended to look down on people who didn't agree with them. They were unwilling to accept that things could be different. They were so wrapped up in rules and regulations that they did not hear what Our Lord was telling them: they lost sight of compassion. They were jobsworths.

It's easy for us all to fall into the trap of the Pharisees, to be rigid about how we think things should be. All of us can be like that. It's easy for us all to be like the son who said he would, but then didn't. And we often do exactly that. The cares of life, the demands of living in a society where bureaucracy is so oppressive, mean that we often fall into these traps.

Today's gospel asks us to take time out to take stock of where we are—each of us as individuals. Are we facing in the right direction? Is the Lord calling us to reshape how we think, and act? This is part of repentance—and it seems to me that that is exactly what happened to the son who said no, and then changed his mind.

Maybe today we can resolve to mean what we say, and say what we mean.