

26TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
STOP AND THINK

“My boy, you go into my vineyard and work today” (Matt. 21: 28)

On this Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A, the Church invites us to reflect on our decisions and choices about obedience to God’s Will. Our final decisions and choices are very crucial to how and where we stand with God. Did you watch the match between Arsenal and West Ham last weekend (19th September 2020)? Playing at home, one would expect Arsenal to be the better team, but they were not. West Ham outplayed them in all departments of the game and showed more determination and willingness to win. They had more shots at goal and created more chances; but at the last blast of the whistle, Arsenal won the match – two goals to one. The good game of West Ham counted for nothing, their better chances resulted in a zero point. What counted was the number of goals. The final result! The West Ham that played better and did all things good but failed to score goals and ended up losers could be compared to the life of an upright man who decides to renounce his integrity to sin and dies. In the First Reading (Ezek. 18: 25-28), the Lord God says: “If the righteous man dies after he turns away from his righteousness and commits sin, he dies because of his sins” (Ezek. 18: 26). This means all his good life in the past account to nothing. His last decisions and choices obliterate his previous goodness. Like the West Ham team, he goes off without a single point after all the performance. This calls for consistency in our lifestyles, decisions and choices.

Two things are relevant to our Christian lives from the above scenario: first is that our lives must be a life of consistency in good works and holiness of life. Secondly, it is an invitation to the conversion of heart, if we have been living an unworthy life. Concerning this, the Lord God says: “If a wicked man does what is good and right, after turning from the sins he committed, he will save his life. He will live and not die because he has opened his eyes and turned away from the sins he had committed” (Ezek. 18: 27-28). The thrust of the message is delivered a couple of verses after: “Come back, turn away from all your offences, that you may not deserve punishment. Free yourselves from all the offences you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezek. 18: 30-31). This is an invitation, or perhaps, a light of hope for the sinner to encourage him to make that decision and choice for a change of heart. This is what we are all invited to do. We must always be conscious that we are sinners in need of conversion and God’s mercy.

In the Gospel (Matt. 21: 28-32) Jesus affirms this Old Testament admonition and invitation with the Parable of the Two Sons. The man with two sons said to the first: "Son, go and work in my vineyard today." He answered: "I will not go." But later thought better of it and went. Then the father went to the second and said the same thing. The son replied: "I will go, sir." But he did not go." The context of this parable was the Temple, the chief priests, the teachers of the Law and the elders of the people had approached Jesus to challenge His authority for doing and saying "all these things." Jesus, knowing that they did not believe John the Baptist to be a prophet asked them about the authenticity of John's baptism. To this they feigned ignorance. Jesus, therefore, refused to tell them the source of His authority and rather told them this parable.

In the parable, the first son represents the tax collectors, the prostitutes, and the common sinners, who have initially ignored the commands of God, sinned with reckless abandon and were the moral wrecks of the society; but on hearing the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus, repented and turned away from their sins. Like the first son, they reconsidered their immoral behaviours and decided wisely to act and live in obedience to the Lord. Similarly, like the wicked man in the First Reading, who decided to renounce his evil ways and live, so the tax collectors and prostitutes, who repented of their sins, were making their ways into the kingdom of God before the chief priests, the teachers of the Law and the elders. The edge that the first son has over the second is that he was able to reflect on his previous response to the father and acted differently and wisely. We need to always stop and think before we act.

In this parable, the second son represents the chief priest, the teachers of the Law and the elders of the people, nay the Jewish nation as a whole, who had promised: "All that the Lord has said, we shall do" (Ex. 19: 8) but reneged on their promise. Like the second son, they failed to do what they had promised. They, like the righteous man in the First Reading, had turned from their righteous ways to commit sins and therefore, would be condemned for their wickedness. These people typify the words of God to the prophet Isaiah reiterated by Jesus: "These people approach Me with words and honour Me with their lips, while their hearts stay far from Me" (Is. 29: 13; Matt. 15: 8).

My dear friends, the Lord needs us to serve in His vineyard. Last week, Jesus told us a parable to remind us that each of us is called and sent to work in the vineyard at different times to work for the same prize. This was to remind us that God does not look at how long we have served but at the fact that we respond positively to His invitation. We can never work enough to deserve a reward – what God gives us

is a gift, a privilege and grace. This week, we are again sent into the vineyard of the Lord to serve. The emphasis today is on matching our words with actions. St. Paul in the Second Reading present Jesus as our perfect model of obedience. He (Jesus) “emptied Himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as men are, He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Phil 2: 7-8). Humility makes obedience possible. If we are to love and obey God, we must be humble; ready to inconvenience ourselves to please the Lord. Again, “Let our ‘Yes’ be yes.” Let us take time today to revisit our decisions; let us search our hearts to see if our words are in agreement with all the promises we have made to God and our neighbours. May the Lord grant us the grace of sincere introspection and courage to change what we can.