

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 66”

Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus is still in the Temple courtyard, and still talking to “*the chief priests and the elders of the people*” who came along to challenge his authority (v23). You will remember that they had asked him why he was doing what he did – messing up their nice little earner with the tradesmen and money changers – and what he thought gave him the right to do it. Jesus responded with a question about John’s authority, which they felt they couldn’t answer, so he refused to answer their question. And, in case they still didn’t get the point about who he was and what he was about, he told them three stories, three parables which stress just how much this Kingdom of God is going to subvert their expectations.

All through this account of Jesus’ life, Matthew has been focussing on the way in which Jesus has made the Kingdom of God a priority, both in his teaching and in his actions. For Matthew, Jesus is the Kingly Messiah, the one who has come into the world, as predicted by the Hebrew Scriptures, to establish the foundations of the sovereign rule of God, again as predicted in the Old Testament. Alongside his stories and parables and arguments, Jesus has been demonstrating what life in the Kingdom will look like – lives renewed, dignity regained, creation restored, hope reignited. As his earthly life approaches its climax, Jesus is now saying something about who is likely to be enjoying life in this eternal Kingdom of God.

And the first of these parables is about two sons – clearly, from the last couple of sentences of it, referring to the religious leaders and contrasting their attitude with that of the poor, the disadvantaged, the down-and-outs, the lowlifes and the criminals. This is one of those stories that is so glaringly obvious that it doesn’t really need any explanation. William Barclay writes, “*The meaning of this parable is crystal clear.*” George Buttrick says, “*This story is direct and simple*”. Dick France: “*It is clear and the point is obvious*”. Donald Hagner: “*It’s absolutely unmistakable*”. But each of them go on to write a page or two about the story and they – and I – have to make a living somehow, so let me just say a few words about it this morning.

This parable involves one of those things that people get easily confused about in church life. You know, preachers who confuse length with depth; worship leaders who confuse volume with sincerity; and here, those pious people who confuse enthusiasm with commitment. We came across the phrase William Barclay uses a couple of weeks ago – “*Promise rather than performance.*” This is that, really.

There’s no doubt that Jesus is aiming this at the religious leaders. He begins by asking “*What do you think?*” He rubs it in at the end by going back to John the Baptist. This is something he thinks will get under their thick skins. It concerns two sons – neither of whom, it has to be said, is perfect. The first son

is rather rude and abrupt in his response to his father – “*I will not*”. The second son – possibly the younger (there is a case to be made from the way the language is used) – is polite and respectful – “*I will, sir.*” But after the original refusal, the first son clearly has a rethink and goes off to do the work as he was asked. The second son seems initially eager to help, but then reneges on his commitment and doesn’t go. The work gets done. Life goes on. But the attitudes of these two sons is what the parable is all about.

Jesus asks a question of his hearers: “*Which of the two did what his father wanted?*” The answer is so obvious that the leaders cannot evade it. But Jesus has phrased his question to use words that are very much part of the religious vocabulary as well: he is talking about “*the will of the Father*”, using words that would have rung bells in the minds of those leaders about what God wants. Are they really doing what God wants of them? Then, after their reply, Jesus bangs home his point using “*you ...you ...you*” to address them (v32). They are the ones who have mistaken promise for performance, enthusiasm for commitment. With their fancy words and clever arguments, their ostentatious prayers and ornate clothing they seem, on the face of it, to be the ones who are heading for the Kingdom of God. Everything about them says pious and religious. They are enthusiastic about doing the right thing, keeping the right rules, giving the right impression. They promise great things in their swanning about the Temple courts and telling the people what they ought to be doing. But their words are not backed up by the appropriate actions as far as God is concerned. And, deeper than that – as we have been observing all the way through this Gospel of Matthew – their attitudes are wrong. For them it’s all about what other people think of them, about putting on a show, about saying they’ll do the stuff. But they never actually achieve it.

In contrast to these enthusiastic leaders, these outwardly religious popinjays, Jesus speaks about (as Eugene Peterson translates it) the “*crooks and whores*”. These are the despised members of society, the ones who don’t fit the template, the ones who behave with little regard for the rules and regulations and with no concern for what others think of them. Some writers describe these “*tax collectors and prostitutes*” as “*the scum of the earth*”. For many people – especially the religious leaders – that’s exactly what they were and that’s why the leaders were so critical of Jesus’ relationship with them. They appear to be laughing in the face of God, because they’re not doing what decent people like the religious leaders expect of them. They’re not perfect, any more than the others are perfect, any more than either of the sons in the story is perfect – but in the end they are the ones who repent, who change their minds and decide to get on with following God’s ways, the ways of the Kingdom. They might not have shown any initial enthusiasm for God’s ways, but in the end their commitment to him is what gets them through. Their transformed lives – that’s what repentance is all about: transformation – allows them access to the Kingdom ahead of the religious leaders.

There! It's not a difficult parable, is it? It's pretty straightforward. But, as is always the case with Jesus' parables – indeed, with all his teaching – the difficult bit is getting on and doing what it says. Which camp do you fall into? Are you with the religious leaders – full of enthusiasm and outwardly very promising? You seem to be doing all the right stuff. You're giving the appearance of piety and seem to be heading for a place in the Kingdom. You say nice long prayers at the house-group and prayer meeting. You like to get involved in stuff that's going on in church. You move your head meaningfully when you're singing hymns. You turn up at all the right events. But underneath there's a tangled mess of attitudes that are all resentment and bitterness, jealousy and greed, lust and selfishness. When the chips are down, those things seep out and the real you peeps through. There's enthusiasm for the doing, but no commitment to the values and attitudes of the Kingdom.

Or are you with the others? It's your commitment to doing God's work that is paramount for you. You want to cultivate those attitudes which are consonant with the values of the Kingdom of God. You're not too worried about ticking all the boxes and following the protocols that others have laid down, keeping other people happy by following their agenda. You're focussing on what God wants, on the long-term vision of the Kingdom. You want to reach out to the lost and unloved, to share God's bounty with the disadvantaged and desperate. And you want God to go on transforming your life to make you more like Jesus.

It's great to be enthusiastic for the Kingdom. But enthusiasm can be temporary and inconsistent. God wants commitment – people who are in it for the long haul, people who will plug away at making a difference in their family, their workplace, their community, even though it may have taken them a while to get going. Don't just say "Yes, Lord" and then give up. Maybe today is the time to renew that commitment and follow Jesus – and "*the crooks and the whores*" – into the Kingdom of God.

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Questions for discussion

1. What would you have responded to Jesus' question in v31? Why?
2. What do you understand by *"the way of righteousness"* (v32)?
3. Do the pious words and actions of the religious leaders count for nothing? Why/why not?
4. Who would be the religious leaders today? And who would be the *"tax collectors and prostitutes"*?

5. Does this parable advocate "deathbed conversions"?
6. What has particularly struck you about this passage? What will you do about it?