

IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO TURN BACK TO GOD

October 1, 2017

The 26th Ordinary Sunday—RA45

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“Remember that your compassion, O Lord, and your love are from of old.” [Psalm 25:6]

A. EZEKIEL 18:25-28-- The Context. This book begins in 592 B.C. with Ezekiel in exile in Babylon. **Today's fragment** comes from a polemic by the prophet **against those who cite the law that says that the son is guilty of the sins of his father**. Ezekiel posits a new principle: **Each person is responsible for his goodness or for his sins**; a wicked person who repents shall be saved, but a righteous person who sins shall be condemned. [JSB 1074]

B. PSALM 25:4-5,8-10,14--The Context. This psalm mixes ardent pleas with expressions of confidence in God who forgives and guides. [TCB 661]

C. PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11—The Context: Paul wrote this book circa 55 A.D to his first Christian community in Europe. Paul writes this letter from prison. **Today's portion** is an admonition to like-mindedness and unity. The appeal to humility and to obedience is rooted in Christology, specifically the statement about **Christ Jesus and his humbling of self, emptying himself like a slave and becoming obedience to the point of death on a cross**. [TCB 314]

D. MATTHEW 21:28-32--The Context: Matthew was a Greek speaking Jewish convert living at the end of the first century in Antioch, Syria and writing to a Jewish audience around 70-90 A.D. [RG 314] **Today's pericope** contains **the parable of the two sons**. If verses 28-30 are taken by themselves they could simply point to the difference between saying and doing. But the additions of vv 31-32 apply the parable specifically. **The two sons represent the religious leaders and the religious outcasts who followed John's call to repentance**. By the answers they give to Jesus' question, the leaders condemn themselves. [TCB 46]

WHAT IS GOD SAYING TO ME PERSONALLY TODAY?

Today we are presented with another challenge by Jesus to the religious leaders of the people. It consists of a parable about two sons whose father operates a vineyard. In case there was any doubt, Jesus clearly spells out the meaning of his story. **Tax collectors and prostitutes**, perhaps the most despised of all people from the religious leaders' point of view, **were making their way into the kingdom of God before the chief priests and the elders**. In their eyes, it was a shocking and dreadfully insulting thing to say.

The key to the correct understanding of this parable is that it is not really raising anyone. It is setting before us a picture of two very imperfect sets of people, of whom one set were none the less better than the other. **Neither son was the kind of son to bring full joy to his father**. The one who in the end obeyed was incalculably better than the other. But, both were unsatisfactory. It tells us that there are two common classes of people in this world. First there are the people whose profession is much better than their practice. Second, there are those whose practice is better than their profession. The real point of this parable is that while the second class is preferable to the first, neither is anything like perfect. **The really good person is the one in whom profession and practice meet and match**. [Barclay, 259-260]

There are **two additional messages coming out loud and clear**. On the one hand, **(1) we can never be complacent about our relationship with God**. It is possible for any of us at any time to find ourselves falling away from our commitment to Jesus and to his Gospel. And God always accepts us where we are. His love and his grace are always available but they can be rejected and spurned. And we can *"die in our sin"*. On the other hand, **(2) no matter how far we have strayed from God and Jesus in the Gospel**, no matter how depraved we have become, **it is never too late to turn back** and we can be absolutely sure that a warm, no-questions-asked welcome is waiting for us. Is there no punishment for the sinner then? We can say that there is indeed. **The sinner basically punishes himself. Our self-seeking, our hate, anger, aggression, violence, jealousy, resentments, our greed and avarice... all lead to isolation,**

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loneliness, hostility with others and often to physical and mental stress and breakdowns.

However, we need to identify where sin really lies. **Sin** is not just a violation of a rule or a law. **It is a violation of our very nature.** It is not just in the violation of certain rules and commandments. Something is sinful because it is wrong, it is evil. **Something is sinful because it denies love and respect for God and for the dignity, the rights and integrity of others.**

Today's Gospel is clearly directed at the religious and civil leaders of the people in Jesus' time. They spoke much about God. **They also heard the teaching of Jesus but made no effort to carry it out.** The chief priests and the elders are like the second son in the story. They say 'Yes' to obey God but they do not listen to Jesus, the Son of God, or follow his instructions. The sinners, the outcasts of both Jewish and Gentile society, are like the first son. They do not obey God's commands, they commit many sins, but later they accept the teaching of Jesus and become his followers.

What is clear from this Gospel and from the First Reading is that **God is primarily concerned with my present relationship to him.** He desires communion with us. Sin becomes a road block to that intimacy. As far as the past is concerned, **God has a very short memory!** In fact, we might say he has none at all. However, it would not at all be a very good idea to think that I could live a life of total selfishness with the intention of making a last-minute deathbed conversion. Apart from the riskiness of such a gamble, such a decision would be quite short-sighted.

In the Second Reading we have the magnificent hymn about Jesus' own spirit of service and selflessness. Paul says this in the context of a plea for greater unity in the Christian community at Philippi. In **urging the Christians to serve each other's needs** with the deepest respect, he asks them to **have the mind of Jesus himself, to think like he does.** And he illustrates this by quoting what seems to have been an early Christian hymn. It speaks of the awesome dignity of Jesus as the Son of God. Yet Jesus did not emphasize this in his life among us. On the contrary **he "emptied" himself and became just like us.** He went further and took on the status of a slave and ultimately accepted human death, and the most shameful of all possible deaths, death as a convicted criminal on a cross, a barbaric form of execution.

If we were to be filled with that same spirit that Jesus had we would have nothing to fear. And what wonderful places our Christian communities would be: places of harmony and unity, of love and caring, of compassion and mutual support, of looking after each other's needs. And, let us remember, it is never too late to start. Let's begin today. [Frank Doyle, S.J.]

WHAT AM I GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

Am I careful not to judge others lest I forget that I, too, am a sinner?

Am I determined to root out self-seeking, anger & resentments from my life?

Do I nourish my faith with daily prayer, study of Scripture and acts of service to others?

Having heard Jesus' teaching re: emptying oneself, how am I going to carry it out?

[Sources: Scripture readings- *The Catholic Bible, NAB translation, Home Study Edition, (TCB)*, and its Reading Guide (RG); *The Jewish Study Bible, Tanakh Translation, [JSB]* Jewish Publication Society; *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, (NJB)* 1990 edition; J.L.McKenzie, SJ, *Dictionary of the Bible (DB)*; Wm Barclay, Matthew, *The Daily Bible Study Series [DBSS]*; Sunday Scripture Reflections by Frank Doyle, SJ at <http://www.sacredspace.ie/livingspace>; 26th Ordinary Sunday [Compiled by Michael Hosemann].