

Around all our homes there are some jobs that need doing. A cupboard needs cleaning out (or maybe you have done that during lockdown), a bit of decorating here or there, a tap washer needs changing, or a self-assessment tax return needs to be filled in and submitted. Every so often someone says, when will you get on with that job? When I get around to it, you reply; it's waited this long, it can wait a bit longer. The result is that you never get round to doing it. Time passes and the list of jobs just gets longer and longer. (Then someone gifts you a Round Tuit and that excuse has gone!)

It's that sort of picture that we see in Jesus' parable - one which has a sharp cutting edge and is only found in Matthew's gospel.

A father has two sons and asks each in turn to go and work in his vineyard. *'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'*

The first son refused point-blank ~ *"I will not"* but then, as he reflects on his words changes his mind and goes.

The second makes all the right noises ~ *"yes father I will go"* ~ but never actually arrives at the vineyard.

Jesus' question to those who are listening is this *"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"*

The answer that comes back is the first. He may at first have objected but he did go. The second son may have made the right noises but his lack of work is evident. The point Jesus is trying to make is that faith is not about words as important as they may be but actions as well. It is about the way faith changes our lives; about responding, maybe not immediately, but about responding.

In Jesus' day, there were those in society who were considered by the religious leaders to be beyond saving, tax collectors being one example: a group of people who worked for the occupying force, the Romans, collected taxes from their own people making themselves rich in the process through exorbitant tax demands. Everything about them was focused on themselves.

Yet what Jesus sees are not outcasts but people who need to find faith: they may not immediately respond but, when they do, that faith is seen in lives that have changed.

By contrast the religious leaders, the ones who made all the right noises, fail to demonstrate real faith in action.

That is the sharp edge to the parable. Faith is not only about what we say, faith is about what is seen in our lives, not just one day but every day ~ the depth to which we allow God to mould and shape us.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians makes the same sort of point ~ *'Let the same mind be in you that [was] in Christ Jesus'* If that same mind is in us then the same set of values the same sort of love that we see in Jesus will flow from us, our faith will not just be words, it will also be actions.

Paul reflecting on Jesus, says what do you see - Love. Love that is expressed in humility and self-sacrifice, not in self-interest. Humility is understood not as putting one's self down but as an attitude inspired by the very example of Christ.

To illustrate his point, Paul quotes a hymn of the early church, which provides us with one of the earliest understandings of Christ, his life death and exaltation. A hymn that some theologians see as a reflection on Jesus' washing of his disciple's feet, at the last supper an act of love, an act of real servanthood.

It's a hymn that can be divided into three parts showing the three stages of Christ's existence. Firstly his pre-existent state as God, he had the nature of God and was God.

*"who, though he was in the form of God"*

Secondly, being God but contrary to what we might have expected from God, Christ did not hold onto his position; he gave it up for the enrichment, for the salvation of all.

*"He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."*

Jesus giving up the glory of heaven to become a man to save us.

If you were asked to give up everything for someone else would you do it?

Jesus did - to the extent of becoming a slave, in the sense that he was obedient to the point of death.

*He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross.*

But that was not the end!

Thirdly, with his resurrection and his ascension, *"God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name."*

What more of a contrast can there be with our modern society, where so many things are run on economic value? To say something is uneconomic is too often to say it has no right to exist. Yet, what can be more uneconomic than giving up the glory of heaven to become human.

The divine economy works contrary to our world. By giving a person receives, by serving a person is served, by humbling themselves, they are exalted.

Jesus' point is that groups like the tax collectors had their whole lives focused on and around this world and the wealth they could make or extort. When they discovered the reality of faith in God, it not only changed their actions it changed their lives, while for others, the religious leaders who made all the right noises, the reality of faith never went below the surface.

What about us? Can the reality of our faith be seen in our lives? Which of those two sons are we like? The one who says no only to change his mind and let action speak for themselves or the one whose action failed to live up to his words?

Faith is about action, not just words.

(P.S. Traditional Round Tuits are readily available online  )