

Twenty Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Authenticity and personal responsibility come through today's readings. Ezekiel emphasizes authenticity as a key factor in self-assessment. He is clearly pointing to the trap of self-deception. The psalmist reflects the honesty of an individual ready to live a life of integrity. Paul puts Jesus forward as a model of self-effacement, and the parable of the two sons reminds us that talk can be cheap, and actions speak louder than words.

Ezekiel 18:25-28 The prophet is making a point about divine justice. Put simply, he argues that a wicked person may repent and lead an honest life thereafter. His past sins are not remembered. Conversely, a good person who falls off the perch and turns to evil will be punished for his sins and none of his former good deeds will be able to speak up for him. It's not where we start but how we finish that matters.

Our own lives are measured by the quality of our relationships

Ezekiel is highlighting the fact that personal responsibility is a major factor in all our relationships. If we were to trawl through the Hebrew Scriptures we would find that the most outstanding attributes of God are justice and compassion. We could say that everything about God is relational, and the lesson to draw from that is, a satisfying and productive life grows out of healthy and fulfilling relationships.

What is there in my relationships that needs fixing? Consider how a simple text message or phone call could be the first step to healing a damaged relationship. *Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me* (Matthew 25:40).

Psalms 25 The poet reflects on having chosen to follow the way of goodness and fidelity to the Lord, but is perfectly aware that this is not an easy road to travel. He is conscious of his weakness and previous failures and so prays for divine help. He knows he needs the companionship of God and prays earnestly for strength and consistency to rise above his human weakness.

The wisdom of experience is evident in the psalmist's prayer. He is smart enough to learn from past mishaps and is resolved to avoid the shame of future bumbles and poor judgment. Like the psalmist, we are wise if we are open to learning, if we are teachable and prepared to absorb the wisdom that we recognise in others.

Philippians 2:1-11 This is the well-known Philippians hymn in which the tremendous self-giving of Christ is extolled. Paul is using the hymn to argue that we Christians need to follow the example of Christ's generosity in all our dealings with each other. It is easy to be struck by the extraordinary gift of himself that Jesus offered and miss the reason behind Paul's reference.

Today's passage suggests that there was a measure of internal tension and rivalry in the Philippian community and Paul is urging those involved to settle their differences and come to some agreement. This, of course, would require give and take from all parties.

The call of the Christ-follower is to put the needs of others before one's own.

He refers to the problem of *eritheia*, which is selfishness or selfish ambition, that was apparently motivating some individuals. Later in the letter he mentions Euodia and Syntyche by name, two ladies who were prominent in the community and whose differences were apparently a cause of friction and community unrest. Paul appealed to everyone in the community to unite and be of one mind in imitation of the self-giving of Christ. Paul's bottom line is, the call of the Christ-follower is to put the needs of others before one's own.

Matthew 21:28-32 This is a parable that, at a surface level, shows us that actions speak louder than words. Neither action of these two sons conforms to their initial response to the father. What is important here is that Jesus has put this example to the chief priests and elders of the people with a view to getting their opinion. From the outset he is involving them in the story.

For these community leaders the response of the first son, presumably the elder, was outrageous. Such rejection of and rebellion against the father's authority was contrary to the social conventions of the time. Honouring father and respecting mother were ingrained in the culture of the day. But notice how, in the interests of a smooth and uncomplicated story, the father does not rebuke the son who openly

defies him. Instead, the narrative continues seamlessly when the elder son has a change of heart and does his father's bidding by going to the vineyard.

The second son put on an act of compliance when asked to go out to work, but he clearly had no intention of willing obedience. He even addressed his father with the title 'sir' (*kyrie*) as if to strengthen his apparent submission with filial respect.

The intended audience had no trouble answering Jesus' question as to which son did his father's will. But the society leaders, the chief priests and elders, were unaware, until now, that they were the target of the story. In their eyes the tax collectors and prostitutes were the recognised sinners while they themselves were putting on airs of righteousness and obedience to Torah.

The problem was they were incapable of recognising true integrity and authentic fidelity to Torah when it hit them in the face in the person of John the Baptist. In the opinion of Jesus, John came in 'the way of righteousness,' a Hebrew expression that went further than saying John was a good man living a life of justice and faithfulness as a Torah-observant Jew. It implies, in addition, that he lived and proclaimed the kind of life that God required, and he dedicated himself to publicly calling his fellow Jews to a change of heart, to a return to God with full commitment (Joel 2:12).

The change of heart of the sinners would trump the hypocrisy of the religious elite.

Referring to those recognised 'sinners' who responded to John and to himself, Jesus declared that they would enter the reign of God before the chief priests and elders. The change of heart of the sinners would trump the hypocrisy of the religious elite. This would certainly have shocked and offended the Jewish leaders when they woke up to what Jesus was getting at. They professed to be dedicated to the law but they had not really obeyed it. More was expected of them, given their training and their public profession of piety and observance. But they had rejected what was obvious to them and to everybody else, namely, the undeniable goodness and prophetic stature of John.

Jesus makes it clear that words are mere chaff if they are not backed up by deeds. The profession of the religious leaders was denied by their behaviour and yet John had given them a chance to change and clean up their act. Paradoxically, the despised sinners sensed their lives were on a collision course and paid attention to what John was advocating. They responded in faith to John's call to *metanoia*, that change of heart that would bring them back into right relationship with God.

It is a fact that our choices reveal what we truly value.



It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.

Prof. Albus Dumbledore. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.



'Doctor, doctor, I need some pills. I've become a kleptomaniac.

'Try these. And if they don't work, get me an iPhone 18 Pro.'

Laurie Woods