

Gospel text

Matthew 21: 28-32

28 What do you think? "A man had two children. He went to the first to say to him, 'My child, go and work in the vineyard today'. 29 He answered him, 'I do not want to'. Later, regretful, he went there. 30 The man went to his another child to ask him the same thing. The latter replied, 'Here I am, Lord'. But he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the father's will?" They answered, "The first". Jesus said to them, "Truly, I assure you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes precede you in the domain of God. 32 For John came to you by taking a way of justice, and you did not believe in him. But tax collectors and prostitutes believed in him. As for you, seeing what was going on, you did not later repent to believe in him.

Gospel commentary - Homily

And why not a late vocation?

Our country went through elections some time ago. I don't know if you noticed, but there is a theme that keeps coming up: change. Candidates promise change. For their part, citizens also want change: they are tired of the current situation and are ready for the big house cleaning. But is it really so? In-depth changes are rare. What they really want, both on the side of politicians and citizens, is to move the furniture around. That's all. Is not it?

Today's Gospel addresses the issue of change. Matthew offers us a parable of Jesus, that of two children whom a father invites to go and work in his vineyard. The first child says no, but later he regrets his decision and goes to the vineyard. The second immediately said yes, but ultimately did not go to the vineyard. So Jesus asked the question: which of the two children did the father's will? The answer is obvious. Why does Jesus offer us something so trivial? What is particular is the way he uses this parable to shed light on a situation of his time, that of the welcome of his mentor, John the Baptist.

To understand what Jesus says, it must be remembered that John the Baptist was the only son of a priest, but that he refused the normal duty of an elder son to continue the priestly line, and even turned his back at the Jerusalem temple to play the role of anti-establishment prophet. This is how he proposes a baptism of water which aims to express a change of life in order to align oneself with an imminent intervention of God. Jesus describes him as someone who took "a way of justice". The word justice here is not to be understood in the sense of "justice has been done", but rather in the sense of "singing in tune", or "hitting the target", as an authentic and transparent person who speaks the truth does, take the right actions, agree with God and with himself. Today we would say: someone genuine.

Now, this is the paradox that Jesus emphasizes: the high priests and the elders of the people did not want to know anything about John the Baptist, while tax collectors and prostitutes opened up to his word. In other words, the people who led a disreputable life and who were considered to be sinners (the tax collectors were seen as the collaborators of the Roman imperialists) accepted the change of life towards the authenticity proposed by John the Baptist, while those who were considered wise and prominent people opposed it. Can you tell me why? At first glance, we can guess that people who have a poor opinion of themselves open more easily to a word of hope where everything becomes possible again, than privileged people who will have to lose something if they undergo a change of life. But can we go further?

For a long time I asked myself the question: what is at stake in this Gospel? It seems to me that it is a matter of being off or not from oneself. When I was a child, I was influenced by parents, friends, the surrounding society. I harbored various ambitions, and certain events marked and shaped me. But one day I dare to ask the question: is everything I am now really me? I suddenly realize that so far I "sang out of tune", that my life did not fulfill me, that it had something "out of tune". Hence the terrible dilemma: what do I do now? The real answer will imply that I let go of things, that I die to a certain past. In a way, this is what Jesus did, not that his past was inauthentic, but he perceived at around 33 or 34 years old, listening to John the Baptist, that his real self was that of itinerant preacher rather than that of a well-known carpenter in Nazareth. What would have happened if Jesus had missed this call? His late vocation earned us the message of the Gospels and this large family of Christians.

I don't think the quest to "singing in tune" will ever end. We walk towards authenticity by dying a little each day to what is inauthentic in itself, by spotting our different "lies". There is always a late vocation waiting for us. This is what the child in the parable symbolizes, who first said no, then repented and now said yes to what he was called to. Basically, it is a huge message of hope: it is never too late to change and become yourself, and to know the unspeakable happiness of being good about yourself, of radiating life. This is what God expects from his child.

But at the same time, it must be added: let's not wait, it's today that it's happening. There is something urgent in the Gospel of this day. These are the last moments of Jesus before he died. The late vocation of which he speaks is addressed to all those who have refused to move so far. It's like a last call. However, to answer it, it only takes a simple decision, and a little self-love, a little faith and courage. What are we waiting for?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, May 2001