

I have this image of a noisy bustling, temple forecourt. One which rings with the calls of merchants, the sounds of animals and the incessant chatter of people. Not the serene silence one would expect at the entrance to a place of worship. Into this throng of crowded humanity strides the Messiah. He knows this place well. He was there when he was a boy and it has been an integral part of his life. With him comes his disciples and, even more people.

Once there he sits and begins to teach. We aren't told what he was teaching that day, just that he was. And then in a group come the Chief priests and the religious leaders. No doubt indignant, if not downright annoyed that he is doing this. We don't know if they were listening to what he was saying before their question, perhaps they were. But we know they challenge him. "by what and who's authority do you teach?" they no doubt expected a simple answer, and one that they could use against him. I think they did not expect the question they got in reply.

It places them in a quandary and they are trapped. They have no wriggle room, and so they decline to answer the question. And he does the same. They have failed in their attempt get some point of leverage, some word from Jesus that they can use to discredit him. The whole mess they are in takes place in their temple. Egg, well and truly, on face.

Then Jesus questions them. He recites the parable of the two sons. Both asked to do the same thing, and both eventually do the opposite of what they said they would do. A seemingly innocuous story. They are happy to answer, I suspect because the answer was so obvious it could not be answered any other way. But it's the explanation that Jesus gives that unmasks, reveals an intransigent attitude. Notice Jesus' words: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

This is not a pronouncement about them now, it's a comment about their destiny. He did not say they would not enter the Kingdom of heaven, just that those they despised and consider unworthy would get there first. He tells them, that they are not the favoured, preeminent people they

believed they were. This must have been a shock. But then Jesus goes further “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

The people saw and recognised what they had heard and repented. They responded to the teaching. But you, who should have known in the first place, you who, were doing wrong and know it, you ignored him and continued on in your wicked ways. Talk about a telling off. Well and truly castigated and in their own place. I can imagine them seething. I wonder at what point the crowd fell silent? Before or after they were rebuked? I wonder how they left and what were the expressions on the faces of those around them? Can I almost see Peter with a grin, and one of profound sadness (or maybe a hint of anger) in Jesus’s?

And what is there for us in this passage? An interesting side story about how the religious leaders were told off, or something much deeper? You’ll not be surprised if I say something much deeper, will you? What was it that Jesus was chastising them for? A lack of ability to recognise a prophet? A lack of ability to recognise what he was teaching? A lack of ability to recognise their faults and shortcomings? A lack of ability to understand what was happening around them? Well, I think all of this and more. He was questioning their understanding, and thus application of the great commandments.

So, let’s look at ourselves here today. Could Jesus tell us that there are people who would go into the Kingdom of Heaven before us? If we are honest, probably! And how does that make us feel. Unsettled, uncomfortable, squirm in our seats? Again probably. Why? Because we can all see times when we were like the two sons. Did the absolute opposite of what we said we would do! For some, this smacks of hypocrisy and yes, certainly, there is an element of this. But are those who cry hypocrite, and then use it as an excuse to ignore the teaching, any better than those they are decrying? I suggest not.

So what are we to do? Well that's simple, we take the humble path. When we know the times when we will fail to do what we should, we should be like the son who changed his mind and went into the vineyard. And like the hearers of John the Baptist, repent and try to do what is right.

Remember what Jesus said to the leaders, "even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him." Here is the key; when we know and see what we've done wrong, don't try to rationalise it or defend it or explain it away, own it and then change. The Psalmist, in Psalm 51 verse 17 says "*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*". That's what Jesus is telling the elders, and us. Repent, and change. Simple, of course; hard, absolutely.

But that's the richness and the joy of the Christian faith and journey. When we fail we can go on, knowing that the simple act of repenting and trying again, is what we need do. And the only difficulty in that, is our egos. But a 'broken heart', is about putting the ego aside, it is trying again. It is hearing, acknowledging our faults to God and then trying to change. To once again try to live the two great commandments.