

# 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year

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Last week we heard the parable of the workers in the vineyard. I mentioned that it is very similar in meaning to the parable of the prodigal Son in St Luke's Gospel. Today's parable is like the concluding part of St Luke's parable, where the older son is resentful of the welcome given to his brother. Isn't God unfair? Why does he overlook the past and focus on the present? Why does everyone receive the same reward in heaven? Why isn't it like a bank account, where we can draw on past credit, as long as we don't go into the red?

Today's parable is one we can all recognise in our own lives. There are times when we make promises we don't keep. Perhaps we forget, or allow other commitments to squeeze out the time. Perhaps we never really intended to carry them out, but didn't feel able to say no. Perhaps we just let people assume we were going to do something, without saying anything to put them right. We can also remember times when we have said 'No', and then thought better of it.

However, Jesus isn't simply making a moral point about keeping promises. He goes on to make a point about our relationship with God. The chief priests and elders are the very people you might expect to be closest to God, and to recognise and respond to his wishes. Instead, they refused to accept John the Baptist's message. Those who seemed furthest from God by their way of life were the ones giving it the warmest welcome. One group welcomed God's words with their lips, but paid no heed to what he really wanted. The other group had clearly broken God's laws, but had changed their hearts, and repented.

God doesn't treat his relationship with us as a business agreement. He loves us, and all he seeks is our love for him, but a love that is alive and real. Only we can set limits to his love. The smaller and harder our hearts, the less capacity we have to receive love. Listening and responding to him here and now is the Holy Spirit at work, softening and warming our hearts, and making our hearts more open to receive him. The battlefield where this takes place is not only our religious practice, but also our family life and other relationships. What we do, or fail to do for others, we do or fail to do for Jesus himself.

Obedience and responsibility lie at the heart of any relationship. Polite words that we do not intend to honour do not suffice. To obey is not to behave like a puppet on a string. It is to listen to the wishes and needs of the other person, and not just to listen, but also to respond. Husbands and wives need to listen to each other's needs and feelings and respond to them – otherwise love becomes self-centred. Parents love their children, and respond to their needs, and children should obey their parents not out of fear, but because they trust them, and know that they want what is best for them. Love is about taking responsibility for another person and caring for them. It does not always mean doing exactly what they want. This might be something harmful. There may also be a clash of responsibilities, when different people want or need things that are incompatible.

We have a responsibility towards God. He loves us and wants what is best for us. At times he asks us for things we find difficult or challenging. Like our human relationships, we can forget, or pay lip service to him. We can imagine, like the priests and elders, that we are still fine with God, when really our lives are self-centred. Relationships cannot be kept on ice. They grow and flourish or they wither and die. It is no good saying to someone 'I still love you' when there has been little sign of it in our words and actions for months or years. While the past does not count for nothing, what matters is how we stand with them now.

Fortunately, lost ground can be recovered, with God, if not always with human beings. We can say 'sorry', receive forgiveness, and make a fresh start. That was the message of John the Baptist that the authorities refused to accept, but those who knew their failings welcomed. This is why they are now making their way first into the Kingdom of Heaven. Which son will we be like?