

Thursday 20th August 2020

The Parable of the Two Sons

“There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

“ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

“Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

“Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”

Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus had just made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. After entering the temple courts and throwing out the money changers (Matt. 21:12), Jesus then returned to Bethany for the night (v.17). The following day he returned to the temple courts to teach and, on his journey there, cursed and destroyed a fig tree which was bearing no fruit. Upon reaching the temple, he met the chief priests and elders who questioned his authority (v.23). It is in that context that he told the parable above.

The target of this parable are the Jewish leaders who refuse to recognise “the way of righteousness” which was proclaimed by John the Baptist and now made manifest in the person of Jesus. Those leaders should have been the first to recognise Jesus as the triumphant king. But the Jewish leadership were openly hostile to Jesus. We know that many of those who followed Jesus, many of those on whose behalf we see Jesus interceding and, no doubt, many of those who had welcomed him the day before were the outcasts of society; people such as the tax collectors and prostitutes, whom Jesus mentions in the parable.

The Jewish leaders would have been horrified at what they would have viewed as an uneducated peasant coming into the city and teaching them about their holy scriptures. Furthermore, he posed a direct threat to their position, their birthright, telling them (v.43):

“I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it.”

That is the purpose of the account of Jesus cursing the fig tree just before this. The fig tree was often used as a symbol for Israel (e.g. Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7). Jesus is making the point that he regards the Jewish leaders as like the fig tree. The fig tree should be producing fruit but does not and so is now worthless. Similarly, the Jewish leaders are failing to deliver what they should and are now just dead wood. They fail to recognise the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah, prophesied in the very scriptures around which they based their lives. And why? Because it was not happening the way that they had envisaged it; the Messiah was not the type of person that they had anticipated; and his message was not one that they were comfortable with.

As is frequently the case, when we look at the Pharisees, we can all see something of ourselves. None of us wants our comfortable world view challenged; none of us wants to admit that we might have got it wrong; we all naturally tend to dismiss, downplay or outright reject others when they confront us with uncomfortable truths and, in doing so, force us to re-evaluate ourselves and threaten those things that we previously held dear. We do this when we deal with other people and, too frequently, we do it when we deal with God.

Are you prepared to listen with an open mind to what God really wants from you? To believe it and act upon it, irrespective of the costs to you? Or are you only willing to meet God on your terms?