

God's grace is sufficient for us

The parable that Jesus tells in the context of a dispute that he is having with leaders of the Jews strikes one as being true to our human experience.

Now, in that parable, he could have had a third son—the third son, who gladly goes out into the vineyard, and does the work required without any complaint, actually accomplishing it. But the parable focuses, instead, on two sons, one of whom initially rebels—insists he will not go; he does not want to go; later, however, after some reflection, he does go, and works in the field—the second sons indicates that he will go; however, he does not.

So the parable focuses on those two individuals. And, I would say, it is true to our lived experience, on a variety of levels. And one such level is simply our day-by-day experience in our own families.

For example, some of us may have been, more than others, rebellious children. Who knows?! We may have been people who said to our parents, “No, I will not do that!” However, on reflection, we maybe went ahead and just did what was required.

I mentioned the story about my friend, Betty, from Thorold, with her T-shirt, on which were the words, “Where in the world is Vankleek Hill?” because Betty left home quite early—well, she went and studied nursing in Montreal—and she never looked back. One of her ambitions in life was to get away from the farm, she told me. However, she does return, almost yearly, to Vankleek Hill, and visits her relatives. So Betty, although she was not likely a rebel, quite the way the figure in the parable is a rebel, decided that she had to take her own course in life; but that does not mean that she has simply rejected her past, her upbringing around Vankleek Hill.

And one could say, perhaps, that rebellion is a healthy reaction, at times, to home circumstances. We recognize that, if we have children; we recognize in our children that they have to find their own course in life. And sometimes that involves rebelling against us, rebelling against parental supervision, and choosing our own life. But we pray that, at some point, if it has not already happened, that they will also recognize the home from which they have come, and see that home is their home to which they return.

The other figure, the other son, is a little more troubling, one could say. It's fairly easy to identify with the rebellious son, or child, who goes off, and then, on reflection, realizes, “This is still home; this is still a person I honour and love.” But the other person is more troubling. This person indicates to the father that he will, in fact, go to the vineyard, and work. But he does not; he does not do it.

Now, if we saw that happening in our own experience, we would feel that something very serious was going on there—something that was a real challenge to the relationship in the family. We may have seen that in our own experience. But it would not at all be a happy scene. We could understand rebellion—temporary, as it might be—but that more deeply-seated reluctance to respond to a call to action surely is much more serious.

Jesus used this parable, as we are told in Matthew's gospel, in a particular setting. It referred, as the context tells us, to the response of certain groups of people to John the Baptist, and therefore, to him (i.e. Jesus). There were people who responded gladly to John the Baptist; and these people were not those whom one might have expected. According to Jesus, they

included tax-collectors and prostitutes. If any people were rebels from the status quo, surely these people were such rebels. Nevertheless, when the opportunity was provided to them, by the appearance of John the Baptist, they were happy to return. On the other hand, this other group of people, whom Jesus was addressing, in fact—leaders of the Jews—these people did not respond to John the Baptist, and, from Jesus' perspective, represented individuals with a much deeply-seated resistance to the will of God, moreso than—God forbid—tax collectors or prostitutes. Evidently, these people were like those who were chastized by the prophet Isaiah, who worshipped God with their lips; but their hearts were far from service of God.

Well, we can look at our own relationship with God. Where do we see ourselves? Or perhaps we see in these two sons aspects of our own identity. Perhaps we see in the one son, the rebel, something of our own relationship with God, which is not simply gladly doing everything which God requires, but, somehow, in the process, questioning and seeking, personally, rather deeply, what following God requires. And sometimes that process is a very difficult one, and takes people into very distant territories, before they finally find where home is, and where God is calling them from. Perhaps we can identify with this one son who is the rebel child, because we have gone our own rebellious way; but, gladly, have, on reflection, found, in Christ, one in whom “the home” of God is found; and we can, on coming to that home, participate, gladly, in God's work in the world.

Or, perhaps, we can also see ourselves in this other son, the more problematic son, the son whose heart is, apparently, elsewhere, totally, from where the father would have him be. We can maybe see in ourselves hearts that are, sometimes, content to be merely going about motions of worship of God, rather than being fully engaged in that worship and service. And perhaps, because of that, we need to reflect on our lives, and find again the joy of our salvation, which motivates us to participate gladly in God's service in the world.

Just one last thought here. The Church, of course, is a place from which many people absent themselves. Now, you are not included. You are here today; and, of course, I am glad for that. But is it possible that the Church somehow does not communicate as clearly as it should this “home” that is God's “home”, and that calls people back rather than scaring people away? So, not only personally, we need to look at ourselves in our relationship with God. But, as a Church, we need to reflect—Are we, as a church, people who struggle with what it means to serve God in our own time and place? Or are we content to go through motions, and therefore be more inclined to be those who scare others away? Are we people who take seriously discovering what it means to worship and serve God, and sometimes have to change course, change attitudes, in order to find that “home”, and then the joy of our salvation which God wishes for us?

In any case, the parable, in its two-fold pattern, addresses us, individually and as the Church. We may be struggling with what it means to serve God; but maybe that's a good thing. We may also be simply content with how things are, and how our lives are in relationship with God, and leave it at that, go no further.

This parable is a challenge for us to see, not only in John the Baptist, but in Jesus, our “home”, the “home” to which God is calling us, that we can come home to, by repentance, if need be, in faith, and gladly, then, serve God, in his work in the world, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.