

Rev. Toan Do
Ezekiel 18:25-28
Philippians 2:1-11
Matthew 21:28-32

26TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Epiphany Catholic Church
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I raise these questions as one example, in a sense very rhetorical. I assume that all of us here, every one of us here, has never missed a Sunday or weekend mass. We are all righteous people. But this is the context in which Jesus was telling, or setting up, the story for us. He left Galilee the last weekend in chapter 20. Now we move on to chapter 21 of the gospel of Matthew. Jesus is in the temple. That is the one background that the gospel did not tell us. And we need to know that. The temple is the place, very contentious and important place, for the religious ruling classes to run the place. They, like the chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they follow every letter of the law. Never miss a thing according to the law of Moses. For them, and also in their mind, they were righteous people. This setting, this background, helped us at least to see the meaning that Jesus was trying to tell us. Have any of us missed a Sunday mass? Let's presume that we never did so; but does not missing any mass or any weekend, any obligation in our life guarantee that we'll enter the kingdom of heaven? As far as myself and my understanding of Jesus' teaching and the scripture, that will not guarantee us entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Particularly in today's gospel, when the parable of the father who had two sons, he went to the first and asked the first son, "Son, go out and work in the vineyard." He said, "No." After, or as the better translation of this phrase in Greek, as he was leaving, he changed his mind and went and did work in the vineyard.

The change of mind is the moment of conversion that Jesus was trying to tell the religious ruling classes. They were so right in what they were doing, nothing could change their mind, not even God himself. When he went to the second son and gave the same order and out of spontaneity, the second son said, "Yes, sir, I will," but then as he was going out, he did not do what he was asked to do. Of course, the inevitable answer that not only the chief priests and the elders, but all I assume, could come to the conclusion that the first son who said first "no," eventually did the father's will. It is so easy and logical conclusion. The more so important is Jesus was asking these religious people to change their way of life, to become

better, because following every letter of the law does not guarantee them their entrance into heaven. Sinners change their mind. Tax collectors came to John the Baptist and prostitutes did the same. The fact that in this gospel, Matthew or Jesus mentioned to the chief priests and the elders that John the Baptist came with righteousness. Tax collectors and prostitutes changed their mind and went to him for conversion through baptism. The same concept of conversion in John's preaching about baptism is the conversion of mind and staying awake, changing their way of life to become better. That same concept, that same urge that Jesus was telling the chief priests and the elders, works here in the same way.

From the first reading today from the prophet Ezekiel, when someone virtuous turns away from virtue to commit inequity, inequity and dies, it is because of the inequity he committed that he must die. But by contrast, if he turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life. Paul echoes that same logic saying, when we talk to our family members, and all of us here, I assume once again, the larger the family that we are part of, the more we see evidently and obviously, that every family, there's one or two, if not an immediate family member, then nieces and nephews, cousins, second cousins, one of them would not do the things that we presume and assume that we are doing righteously and right. Let's say one of our family members, who often misses Sunday masses, and we say to that person, "You need to be more religious. You need to be more close to God like I myself." Just think of that argument. Paul tells us just the opposite, "Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vain glory." The word that translates here "vain glory" is the pride, the inflations that come out of our heart.

In one of my previous parishes that I was sent to, place and name and year I decided to leave aside. When I came there and this parish, also like some or like most of us here, they participated in the liturgy very well. I give praise to them. As you see, many of us who visit other churches and parishes, not only here in the archdiocese, in other states, not every church do people follow the mass part as well as here, we people or members of Epiphany, do. Same thing in this parish.

But there's one thing that by tradition or custom of this parish, after the consecration, the proclamation of faith, instead of singing, they recite verbally. So, there was one family in this parish. They came to me, and they wanted me to ask the people to change that habit. And in the conversation, very early on in the conversation, this family, both husband and wife, told me upfront, "We know about our Catholic faith and the catechism of the Catholic church more than any member of this parish." This is real. And I said to myself, the sweat began to fall on my back and my behind glued to the chair, (laughter) not knowing how to respond.

And I said, "But as you know, it is not required. As we see, we celebrate weekday mass. There's no singing of that part, but it is this way." But the attitude of this family, of this family that came to be so righteous and nothing, even participating, even celebrating in the same Eucharist, they see themselves above or know it all. And as you see, even following the rubric, the mass part, the Roman missal, to every letter does not make the Eucharist, does not make the celebration prayerful and uplifting. It is the heart that connects everyone to the spirit of God that gives each and everyone life. In today's gospel, as you see, the purpose that Jesus tried to tell these groups of chief priests and elders, we can interpret that either the older son could be the people of Israel, or the older son could be the Gentile and vice versa. The younger son could be interpreted as the chief priests and the elders and the Pharisees. And the older son represents all the rest.

Jesus was asking for not following every letter of the mosaic law, but true conversion of the heart. And we all see that true obedience to the law, true obedience to God, flows not from the lips of the person, as the second son seemed to say; but from the conversion of the heart. As the oldest son who said "no" first was going out, and we hope, let us hope, that as we all leave this Eucharist this evening, as we go out, we imitate the oldest son. We change our heart toward God.