

# Thought, Word, and Deed

October 1, 2017

*A Reading from the Gospel According to Matthew*

*Chapter 21: 23-32*

<sup>23</sup>Now when he had gone into the Temple and was teaching there, the high priests and the elders of the people came to him saying, “By what authority do you do these things?”

<sup>24</sup>And Jesus replied to them, “I too will ask you one thing, and if you tell me I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Where did John’s baptism come from? Was it from heaven or from people on earth?”

<sup>25</sup>They discussed it among themselves, and said, “If we say ‘from heaven,’ he will tell us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup>But if we tell him ‘from people on earth,’ we will fear the crowds, for everyone holds John as a prophet.”

<sup>26</sup>So they told Jesus, “We do not know.” He said to them, “Then neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

<sup>27</sup>“What do you think? A man had two children. To the first he said, ‘Son, go out today and work in the vineyard.’ <sup>28</sup>But the son said, ‘I don’t want to.’ Later, he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>To the second he asked the same. He said, ‘I will go sir,’ but didn’t go. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did the father’s will?”

Jesus responded, telling them, “Amain, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes will go before you into the kingdom of God. <sup>32</sup>John came to you on the path of justice and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed in him, and even after you saw, you did not repent. . . .”

\*

*I grew up near the sea: Time and again, I'd pick up treasures walking the beach—things of no value, transformed into marvels and charms. Pieces of bottle glass, changed into emeralds by water and light. Stones that glittered, pale shells and driftwood sculpted by waves. I'd fill my pockets, but colors, designs, faded as soon as I took them home. They sit on my bookshelves years afterward, lifeless and dull.*

*Things just aren't the same once you take them away from the sea.*

*Something like this can happen when we take a parable too far away from where Christ preached and healed, fed and amazed. . . .*

*In today's text, Jesus confronts important, powerful men at the Temple. They try to shame him by demanding, "Who sent you to us? Where does your authority come from? Ours comes from Moses, friend. Ours comes from Herod. Ours come from Rome."*

*Jesus is nobody from nowhere in their eyes.*

*Yet by parrying one question with another—clever rabbis do this a lot—Jesus reveals they're just cowardly frauds. They don't comfort or help, they judge—their job is keeping things the way they are. Smug and self-righteous, they're also comfortable, and don't like change.*

*The crowd that gathers this morning to listen comes from a world of small villages where everyone knows everyone else's troubles and secrets, too. This is the culture of Christ's parables, different from ours in many ways; how we respond's liable to miss something they would've felt.*

*See, for us now, this tale presents an easy choice. Results are what matter to us a lot more than appearances. For us, the first son is better because even though he resists, eventually, he has misgivings and does what he's been asked to do anyway. The second tells us what we want to hear, but he's no help, is he?*

*"Sure, sure—I'll do it, I'll call her, I'll fix that—but not right now."*

*The first son, perhaps, has a guilty conscience. Who'd pick the second, though?*

*Probably, more would've sided with him two thousand years ago.*

\*

*The people Jesus challenged with his parables cared about what the neighbors would think. Their concern wasn't which boy got the job done, but the father's honor. In their community, what the sons said would become public knowledge, whispered around. The first son's rudeness would've embarrassed the family. The other's lie is more easily forgiven; he got distracted, he just forgot. The first son hurts his father's reputation; his brother saves face. For the priests, showing respect was what counted, not picking grapes.*

*Jesus, though, never asks us who was more proper, better behaved, or more polite. "Which of the two did the father's will?" he wonders.*

\*

*Let's think about the vineyard here. Several parables talk about vineyards. Jesus lifts this image from his own favorite prophet, Isaiah. . . .*

*Peasants from Galilee didn't own vineyards. Drive east toward St. Charles on Route 38 if you'd like to see why.*

*When was it they planted those vines, across the roadway from Aquaviva? How many years before they poured their first glass of wine?*

*Subsistence farmers, just scraping by—struggling to feed themselves and pay their taxes couldn't afford to wait several years 'till a good crop came in.*

*Chances are, you would never see any return; if you were fortunate, maybe your kids would. Maybe they'd benefit from all that sacrifice, worry and work.*

*That's how Jesus asks most of us to help create the kingdom of God—not for ourselves, for we won't live to see it—though when we're young maybe we're sure we will.*

*Every person has got to have some basic needs met—food and shelter—before they can fret very much about what they can do to save the world. Most of the peasants who listened to Jesus didn't. Some of them never would.*

*Yet, it was obvious, those scribes and high priests did. Just as it's obvious most of us do. we'll never starve.*

\*

*Sometimes, we “do our father's will”—meet the demands, that is, of our own conscience—decades after we turn away, saying, “Not yet.”*

*Like, I hope, some of you, I've spent the past two weeks, night after night, glued to my set—remembering, re-grieving, the Vietnam War. I've been listening to soldiers from both sides—eloquent, courageous, conflicted people—try to make sense of what happened, and what it means to them now.*

*And to us all. That black granite wall on the National Mall was dedicated in 1982. It has become a shrine, a place of pilgrimage, for homage, and reconciliation.*

*No one anticipated that visitors would leave so many tributes and wreaths where all those names—58,000—are etched in stone. “The Wall gave people license to mourn publically and to start bringing things,” explains Jan Scruggs, who raised the money to pay for the monument. “There something profound about it,” he says, “feeling the connection between the living and the dead, feeling the way we still love and care for people.”*

*Supposedly, the first small gift was someone's brother's Purple Heart, pressed in wet concrete once construction began.*

*By the time it was finished, many brought gifts, leaving behind what a lot of vets did in Vietnam—some irreplaceable part of themselves.*

*As things piled up, park rangers started collecting them. In just a few months they had boxed up more than 1200 items. In four years, they had 12,000. Now, they've got well over 400,000. . . .*

*Dog tags and college rings, sea shells and such. A football helmet. A motorcycle. Pairs of gym shoes. A helicopter blade. Five cans of fruit salad. Often, the ace of spades. A new harmonica. A tiny model carousel. . . .*

*And, of course, there are troves of letters, addressed to husbands, sons and dads—a few of them clipped to the sonogram of a grandchild.*

*One confesses, “You taught me to smoke. I’m trying to quit, Dad. You’d want me to by now.”*

*Another reads:*

*“My Dearest Son,*

*“Today I am coming to see your name on the “wall.” I haven’t been ready until now, but I know that I must see it before I die. . . .*

*“I wanted to bring your teddy bear but just couldn’t part with it. Instead I brought your first sweater. You are always in my heart. . . .*

*“God be with you ‘til we meet again.”*

*One simply says,*

*“I can’t forgive you for going, but I won’t forget I was your wife who let you.”*

\*

*Maybe we once promised ourselves we’d do some work in the vineyard of grief, for all those people—ours and theirs—who never came home. Maybe we couldn’t; maybe we just refused. Ken Burns’ work may help us see we can deny and delay only so long; then it comes back.*

*One of the questions that sometimes confuse us is what’s more important—what we believe, or how much we do? Today we’re taught what we truly believe ought to change who we are; and what we do naturally flows from this identity.*

*We are called to follow Jesus. We hear, and we wonder; we try, and we become. We learn by grace and by hard experience the Gospels are more than stories about someone who lived ages and ages ago. They are the clearest way to find what God wants here and now.*

*Christ tells us once there was a father who had two children. One said he'd help—everyone thought he would, but it turns out he didn't. One said he wouldn't, but—I don't know why—it turns out he felt he had to. Which child are we?*

*God bless you all.*