

Year A Creation 4, 27th September 2026
Exodus 17:1-7. Philippians 2:1-13. Matthew 21:23-32

Do as I say – the demand of parents down the ages and the bane of children's lives down those same ages as they hear their parents say one thing but do another. Did any of you have the courage to call out the hypocrisy? Speaking for most of us here, I suspect the answer is probably not.

If we had we would no doubt have been ordered to apologise and yes, the word 'sorry' might well have passed our lips, but probably lacking in anything that might have resembled sincerity – not least because we wouldn't really have felt sorry at all, it was just a word that had to be said to restore any semblance of peace.

Say the words that people want to hear and everything will roll along nicely, not least because we want to be liked. Sadly that also applies too often to our Christian lives. Don't go to an evangelical church and express your doubts about the resurrection actually happening or go to a more liberally-minded church and bang on about original sin for instance. We keep shtum because we want to be liked.

I'm not going to go party political here because politicians of all parties in every country are basically as bad as each other. But politicians are among the worst examples of people who adjust what they say to make themselves liked. What's even worse is that most of the time they just say what their own tribe wants to hear and hope to garner enough support from voters they hope are fed up enough with whoever is in power to give them the chance to make just as much a mess of things as their predecessors. Truth takes second place to expediency. Forgive the cynicism of a former political journalist.

But luckily for us, Jesus isn't like that at all. He doesn't crave the popularity that most of us want. No, he speaks the truth. And Jesus can't help doing that because he is the Truth and he longs to bring anyone and everyone into the kingdom who is willing to acknowledge that being in relationship with God is the ONLY way to enjoy that full and abundant life that is on offer.

And the truth that Jesus speaks in this week's Gospel should embarrass us all – well it certainly embarrasses me – because we know full well that while we might talk the talk every Sunday morning, or even in a Bible study group or a

faith development group, and present an image of being spiritually mature, all too often we don't always walk the walk the rest of the week, even at home.

Yet Jesus words here sting us into remembering that as Christians we are called to live wholly integrated lives, that our words and actions should mirror and reinforce each other.

When Jesus told this parable of the two sons with their different responses to his request to go and work in his vineyard, he knew what the response of the chief priests and the elders would be. It could be no other.

(And when I refer later on to sons in a modern context, please take it as read that I am also referring to daughters)

In the end what the sons said didn't matter, all that mattered was what they did. In other words, actions speak louder than words.

We too know that that's true. But we, and I don't mean by that literally everyone, can be rather too good at finding reasons for inaction. We can too easily convince ourselves that action right now is too disruptive or too difficult and so put it off.

But back to the Gospel and to put it in context. We're on the Monday of Holy Week, Jesus has just cleared the temple, which is why he is asked what authority he had to do that. In fact this is the first of five challenges to Jesus' authority in the next chapter and a half. As usual with Jesus, he answers a question of his own – this time about the baptism of John the Baptist.

The chief priests and elders are caught between a rock and a hard place as whether they answer yes or no they are going to be in hot water. So they take the coward's way out and mumble they don't know.

That's when Jesus pounces. To use a modern idiom, he tells them You're all mouth and no trousers. You're just like the second son. You talk the talk and make lots of fancy promises, but when John offers you the good news of the kingdom, which might require you do a little work, you're nowhere to be seen, you refuse to do God's work.

Yet the people you despise the most, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, the ones who don't talk the talk let alone walk the walk, they are the ones who

recognised their own helplessness and hopelessness, they are the ones who responded in droves and flocked to the wilderness to repent in the waters of baptism.

And even when you saw countless people responding to the good news, you did nothing. You know what, the people at the very bottom of your religious hierarchy, they will enter the kingdom of God before you.

I want to divert very briefly to talk about repentance, because I think there are one or two things we need to understand. Repentance is – or at least should be – a life-long task, which in a sense sounds grim beyond belief. But it's not meant to be like that. Ezekiel in today's alternative Old Testament reading says Repent and live.

Ezekiel wasn't one for equivocating, unlike the chief priest and elders when faced with Jesus' question. Die with iniquity or live with righteousness was his message. Like Ezekiel we too should not equivocate in the face of evil, we have to call it out. Equivocating out of fear of what people might say about us or think us is not what being a Christian is about. Ezekiel didn't equivocate. He called a spade a spade.

Jesus's first words in Mark's Gospel are Repent and believe because the Kingdom of God is at hand.

It was Martin Luther who reinvigorated the concept of repentance – which of course didn't require the payment of indulgences to the local priest or bishop. Luther's obsession was that humans are made right with God purely by divine grace through faith.

Hopefully we all want to be made right with God, and the best way to do that is through repentance. Which is why we collectively say the confession each week – to be made right with God.

But what is important to emphasise is essential as repentance is, it should be entirely life-giving and never ever a reason to fall into a pit of self-hatred. It is a movement towards wholeness. Each time we genuinely repent of whatever we need to repent of, we should give rejoice that once again we have been made right with God. And that is what the so-called sinners did when they came to the waters of baptism.

To return to Jesus' criticism of the chief priests and elders..... Note that He doesn't say that they won't enter the kingdom of God. They will and they'll have to cope with the fact that the people they so despise will be more honoured than them.

But don't think we can get away with wondering how the religious leaders could be so arrogant and obtuse at one and the same time. This Gospel is for everyone, sons and daughters alike. We should be squirming as we ask ourselves 'Which son am I?'

I know I'm squirming. Am I the son who talks the talk, but prefers not to see repentance as something that is lifelong, the son who makes promises that I don't keep.

Or am I the son who says the wrong thing but eventually repents and obeys. Am I the son who might not sound that spiritual but does the work of love and mercy when the rubber hits the road. The one who recognises that God is still at work in the world today, however awful His creation looks.

These are questions we should all be asking ourselves. Another question we should be asking ourselves is whether, precisely because our life is relatively straightforward compared to a large proportion of the world's population, we treat faith and religion too casually, as an optional extra where it doesn't really matter if we only come to church once or twice a month. The church wasn't created by humans, it came into existence through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit on that morning in Jerusalem.

Jesus is inviting us to be like the first son. But we can't be like the first son if our faith is just tethered to religious abstractions, if we live a Christianity of the mind without living a Christianity of the flesh.

When it comes to our life with God, words – however beautiful they are – are not enough.