

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25 (24); Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you

Matt 21:28 [Jesus said:] “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29 He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Today we have the first of three parables of judgment. The other two are the parable of the tenants (27A) and the parable of the wedding feast (28A). Further on, there is a conclusion to this series in Matthew 24:1-2 (see below under NT foreground).

This particular parable is unique to Matthew. The text is strongly “redactional”, that is, from Matthew’s style. It is very hard to detect a source behind the parable. There is a slight tension between the parable and the application: the parable has mutually exclusive “destinies” for the two sons, while the application is—mercifully—relative: the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God *ahead of you*. The risk for us today is to leave the teaching in the past (to do with “them”) and the challenge for us today is to apply the parable not to “others” but directly to ourselves. In the commentary below, because the parable is so evident, more space will be given to the contexts in the Hebrew Bible, the Paul and Matthew.



KIND OF WRITING

The fifth great narrative of this Gospel tells of Jesus’ journey to (19:3-20:34) and entry into Jerusalem (21:1-24:2). As it stands, therefore, the parable must first of all be understood in the context of this part of the Gospel. The story unfolds over two days:

The Entry into Jerusalem (21:1-11)

Day 1 (21:12-22)

Entering the Temple (21:12-16)

Leaving the Temple (21:17-22)

Day 2 (21:23-23:39)

Entering the Temple (21:23-23:39)

Leaving the Temple (24:1-2)

Our parable and teaching take place on the second day, within the precincts of the Temple.

As regards the form, we have here a short parable (vv. 28-31a) and a sharp application (31b-32).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, “*All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.*” And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.

Thought for the day

In today’s parable, the offence is to be found in the blindingly obvious answer to the question Jesus sets. The application is then very sharp: those who seemingly never have experienced sin and conversion (who are they?) are quick to judge others who come to God through failure and fracture. It is like the ninety-nine who have no need of conversion—we may doubt that they ever really existed! A certain complacency can mark any settled religious group and if we add to that self-righteousness, then the mix is explosive and we are far from the Gospel as preached by Jesus.

Prayer

Blessed are they who know their need of God (Mt 5:3). May we recognise ourselves as part of the community of the needy and show the compassion of Jesus to all without distinction.

He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “*All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.*” (Exodus 24:3-7)

The Lord said: *Because these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote.* (Isaiah 29:13)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Context 1

In this case, there is a triple context. The first is the general context in Matthew, writing for a Jewish Christian community, which has in all likelihood just broken away from the mother religion.

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. (Matthew 23:13)

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Matthew 9:9–11)

In this context, the parable is incipiently allegorical. The brother who initially said yes and then no stands for, in Matthew’s community, the Jewish people, originally faithful who did not accept John the Baptist or Jesus. The brother who initially said no and then yes stands for the Gentiles and all the excluded who, although not originally faithful, finally said yes to both John and Jesus.

Context 2

The second context is the immediately literary one. These three parables are preceded by a fractious dispute, which is really part of the whole pericope.

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. (Matthew 21:23–27)

This tone is maintained in the conclusion to the parables:

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all

will be thrown down.” (Matthew 24:1–2)

Context 3

The teaching about the will of God is strongly attested in this Gospel.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the *will* of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

For whoever does the *will* of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:50)

Your kingdom come. Your *will* be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your *will* be done.” (Matthew 26:42)

ST PAUL

Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God. (Romans 2:25–29)

It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham’s children are his true descendants; but “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. For this is what the promise said, “About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son.” (Romans 9:6–9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 28 The experienced reader realises immediately that a comparison between the two will be operative. Vineyard is not just a place of employment but a symbol for Israel and even for God’s love for Israel (see Isaiah 5).

Verse 29 No reasons are given for ei-

ther choice; that is not the focus.

Verse 30 An identical story with the motives suppressed as before.

Verse 31 This is hardly rocket science, of course, but the goal is (a) to distinguish apparent and real obedience and (b) to get the rulers to condemn themselves (see above, Matthew 23:13). Compare: *You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’*” (Matthew 15:7–9) See Isaiah 29:13 above. Jesus’ attack is ferocious, but any more harsh than many critiques in the Israelite prophets.

Verse 32 The example of John is drawn upon. In the immediate context, the leaders refused to say whether they thought he was from God or not. Yet, the evidence of repentance was surely warrant enough to recognise that John was a true prophet. It is not accidental that John anticipated in his ministry the very same outreach which marked that of Jesus.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It is possible to be a dutiful and observant Christian, and yet feel there is something missing. It makes such a difference when your heart is in what you are doing—so much better than just going through the motions. Where do you experience that most in your life?
2. The desire of Jesus for us to grow in that kind of committed, enthusiastic involvement in life. What encourages you to grow in this way?
3. The elders probably thought well of themselves in contrast to the tax collectors and sinners. Perhaps you know some unconventional people, ones who appear to ignore the ‘right’ way of doing things, and yet they have taught you something about true goodness.

PRAYER

O God, you alone judge rightly and search the depths of the heart.

Make us swift to do your will and slow to judge our neighbour; that we may walk with those who follow the way of repentance and faith and so enter your heavenly kingdom.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

You should have the same attitude toward one another that Jesus had

Phil 2:1 Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort provided by love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any affection or mercy, 2 complete my joy and be of the same mind, by having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one purpose. 3 Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. 4 Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well. 5 You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had,

6 who though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature. 8 He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross! 9 As a result God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth— 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The first part of the reading is an exhortation and the second part is a wonderful early Christian hymn, cited by Paul.

KIND OF WRITING

Philippians is a real letter, with the following outline:

	Letter	Speech
1:1-2	Greeting	
1:3-11	Thanks	Introduction
1:12-26	Body of the Letter	Background
1:27-30		Topic
2:1-3:19		Proofs
3:20-4:20		Conclusion
4:21-23	Greeting	

Our passage comes from the first proof, dealing with following and mutual service.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The occasion of writing to express gratitude for the gift sent with Epaphroditus. There are also several practical issues. Overall, the letter is very personal, with a good deal of autobiography and a great deal of affection for the Philippians. There are issues about conduct and behaviour, which bear directly on the use of the hymn.

RELATED PASSAGES

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-11)

Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. (Philippians 3:15-16)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

The overall pattern in the hymn is pre-existence, existence and post-existence. The hymn is non-Pauline and it most likely reflects early Christian worship.

Verses 1-2 The appeal is intense and personal: notice the four-fold “if” matched by the four-fold results: mind, love, spirit, purpose.

Verse 3 We may deduce that there was some serious rivalry in Philippi in even so good a community of believers.

Verse 4 This is very balanced indeed.

Verse 5 The introduction “stitches” the hymn into the ethical persuasion. The noun “mind” in Greek is really the verb to think. A good parallel in Paul would be Rom 12:3.

Verse 6 Form (*morphē*) is difficult. Cur-

rent in classical and Hellenistic Greek, with a wide range of meanings—“stature, form, condition, feature, external appearance, reproduction”—*morphē* is used relatively little in the Bible. Exploited is also difficult: It may mean not only “to grasp something forcefully which one does not have” but also “to retain by force what one possesses.” Thus, it is possible to translate 2:6 in two quite different ways.

Verse 7 “Emptied” in relation to the cross comes up in 1 Cor 1:17. Notice again, the form—*morphē*—of a slave.

Verse 8 Humble is found in the teaching of Jesus (Matt 18:4; 23:12; Luke 3:5; 14:11; 18:14). Obedient to death—cf. Hebrews 2:10-18. V. 8c could be an addition by Paul, reflecting his own emphasis on the cross (Phil 1:29, 3:10, 18 and 1Cor 1:23; 2:2).

Verse 9 Exalted: the simple form is found in John and Luke-Acts to refer to the resurrection (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34; Acts 2:33; 5:31). The complex form is found only here in the New Testament and in the Greek Bible (LXX) only once: “For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.” (LXX Ps 96:9)

Verse 10 There is a suggestion that this verse may be a liturgical instruction.

Verse 11 Confess (*homologeō*) is a foundational Christian word, both as verb and as noun (Matt 7:23; 10:32; 14:7; Luke 12:8; John 1:20; 9:22; 12:42; Acts 7:17; 23:8; 24:14 etc.)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Working and living with others is always difficult. Even among Christians, the risk is that we “read” this reality politically and not, like Paul, spiritually, that is as part of our discipleship.
2. Jesus emptied himself: perhaps I have known people like that myself or have been called myself to some extraordinary act of generosity.
3. When I did I first say “Jesus is Lord” and mean it from the heart?

PRAYER

On the path of discipleship, you call us loving God to follow and imitate your Son. Give to us the generosity to give our all, to lose our lives, that we be true followers of Jesus, who made himself poor that we might be rich. Amen.

Because they turned away from transgressions they shall surely live

Ezek. 18:21 *But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die.* 22 *None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live.* 23 *Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?* 24 *But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die.*

Ezek. 18:25 Yet you say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? 26 When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. 27 Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. 28 Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. 29 *Yet the house of Israel says, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

According to traditional biblical teaching, punishment may go down through the generations. There are extreme examples in the OT and severe threats “to the third and fourth generations.” However, Ezekiel sets this tradition aside in a striking and significant reversal. For the full impact, it would be good to read all of chapter 18. Trans-generational punishment would be abhorrent to us and yet there lies behind it a truth of experience. It is true that the deeds of parents affect the lives of children. A domestic example might be the experience of children raised by alcoholic parents. An international example might be war guilt felt in Germany by the next generation. Irrational and unjust, but real, alas.

KIND OF WRITING

Chapter 18 is in the form of a dispute, which discusses directly trans-genera-

tional guilt and punishment. Here is an outline of chapter 18.

- 1-4a: The proverb is cited and rejected
- 4b-9: Each generation is responsible
- 10-21 Proverb and principle reaffirmed
- 21-24: Individual conversion
- 25-29: The new principle defended
- 30-32: Community conversion

This is a very important moment in the development of biblical ethics. Ezekiel himself has passage which reflects the traditional teaching. See Ezekiel 16 and 23, where the fall of Jerusalem is seen as a punishment for the sins of earlier generations. Our wider excerpt is framed by an *inclusio*, in v.25 and v. 29, proving that it is indeed a unit of teaching

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Ezekiel reflects the time of the great Exile. Chapter 18 is a (very) distinct unit between chapters 17 and 19. It takes up the traditional teaching about trans-generational punishment—expressed in the proverb “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”—and sets it aside with a structured argument. It is possibly the case that trans-generational punishment reflects social conditions in which (a) people found it hard to forgive and (b) acted as a brake on conflict which could do down the generations.

RELATED READINGS

Illustrating the proverb

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex 20:5–6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 25 The principles found in vv. 21 and 24 are defended and affirmed. The reflection on the sovereign freedom of the potter from Jeremiah 12 may help us here. God is free to cancel the national debt (so to speak!). The problem is not so much that God might forgive but that God might change God’s mind. Fate is not unalterable; things as they are now is not how they must always be.

Verse 26 That is, *they shall die* but no one else.

Verse 27 That is, *they shall live*, this time the same principle but positively stated.

Verse 28 An emphatic restatement of the preceding verses. A very elaborated form of this verse appeared earlier:

But if this man has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise, who does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour’s wife, does not wrong anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no advance or accrued interest, observes my ordinances, and follows my statutes; he shall not die for his father’s iniquity; he shall surely live. (Ezek 18:14–17)

Again, the message is that it is possible to break from the past.

Verse 29 This verse should trigger an echo in the mind of the reader:

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Is 55:6–9)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Ezekiel holds up the possibility of change in us and even in God. The sense of freedom is palpable—we are not chained irrevocably to the past. Reflect on your own experience of this reality.
2. Choice have consequences—not always as dramatic as life and death—which can be serious. Reflect on your own significant choices and the effects they have on your life.
3. Are you facing a choice at present, a choice with major consequences? This reading may help in the discernment.

PRAYER

God, ever faithful and ever new, you hold out to us the choice of life or death. Guide us to choose the path which leads to life, to happiness and to you.

THE LITURGY

Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25 (24); Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32

READINGS 1 AND 3

Our first reading illustrates the possibility of a change of mind, both in God and in believers. While not directly related to the insider / outsider setting of the Gospel, it does serve to anticipate the parable of the two sons.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

As is often the case, Psalm 25 (24) makes an excellent response, drawing out some of the meaning for today. *Lord, make me know your ways. Lord, teach me your paths. Make me walk in your truth, and teach me: for you are God my saviour.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Ezekiel 18:25-28

Our reading today represents a break in biblical teaching or at least an evolution. Previously, it was commonly held that God punishes “to the third and fourth generations.” Ezekiel, for the first time, teaches individual responsibility.

Second reading

Philippians 2:1-11

Today, we hear an ancient poem or hymn, pre-dating St Paul’s. It gives us a window on how the very first generation of Christians prayed and worshipped.

Gospel

Matthew 21:28-32

The parable is blindingly obvious—and the application sharp. Don’t let the message remained locked in the past because the parable does indeed speak to us today.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

The book of Job is part of world literature, exploring the universal problem of innocent suffering. The poetry is great; the exploration is complex; final “response” of YHWH is enigmatic.

Monday 28 September

St Wenceslaus, martyr

Job 1:6-22

The great story of Job begins today. No-

tice: (i) Satan is not the later devil, but a very cheeky member of the heavenly court; and (ii) there is something quite formulaic about Job’s reaction, a devotional façade, soon to be torn away.

Luke 9:46-50

Our Gospel today addresses two issues never that far away: ambition and jealousy. Two unpleasant relatives!

Tuesday 29

Sts Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, archangels

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

Daniel has a vision of the heavenly throne, including angels. The passage is very important for understanding Jesus’ use of the expression “Son of Man.”

John 1:47-51

Two important hints are buried in this reading. Firstly, in rabbinic tradition, the tree of knowledge was understood to be have been a fig tree (being the first species mentioned). In a transferred sense, sitting “under a fig tree” meant reading the Torah, that is, already on the spiritual quest. The heavens opened with the angels ascending and descending evokes Jacob’s ladder in Genesis 28:10-19. Jacob recurs in John 2-4, perhaps a later echo of restoration of Israel (= Jacob) going back to Jesus. In the context, it points to Jesus’ opening the path to God for all.

Wednesday 30 September

St Jerome, priest, doctor and biblical scholar

Job 9:1-13, 14-16

Job, in a brief moment of more calm reflection, takes up the topic of the mystery of God’s mind and intentions. Something of this insight will find its way into the final message of the book.

Luke 9:57-62

The cost of discipleship—everything, in reality—is the focus of the several stories today. Jesus demands all or nothing.

Thursday 1 October

St Thérèse of Lisieux

Job 19:21-27

The words here are very famous—being set to music in Handel’s *Messiah*. In spite of everything, Job is sure that God is

just.

Luke 10:1-12

The sending of the seventy(-two) is nowhere else reported in the Gospels, being unique to Luke. It is often thought to be an anticipation of the sending to the Gentiles, the second mission, in the Acts of the Apostles (by the same author). Like the Twelve, they are empowered to do *exactly what Jesus himself did*.

Friday 2 October

The Holy Guardian Angels

Job 38:1, 12-21, 40:3-5

Finally, God breaks his silence and his words are overwhelming—both as poetry and as theology. The radical incapacity of humans to scrutinise God is forcefully underlined and leaves Job gasping.

Luke 10:13-16

Prophets are not always comfortable people and in today’s Gospel Jesus points out the missed opportunities of several towns and village. It is vital not to leave us teaching in the past, of course. Would he say the same to us today?

Saturday 6 October

Bl Columba Marmion, abbot

Job 42:1-3, 5-6, 12-17

Job’s final answer is much discussed. It cannot mean he thinks he was wrong all along. Instead it must mean something like “I will suspend my case before the mystery.” The marvellous provision of “new” children is an ironic evocation of the *lex talionis* and an unexpected twist in the book of Job. After all, one set of children cannot be simply replaced by another!! It is just not human.

Luke 10:17-24

The central passage of this reading—the prayer of Jesus—is extraordinarily important. In some form, it goes back to the historical Jesus. Two consequences follow. *First of all*, Jesus was aware of a quite particular relationship with the Father and his own role as revealer. *Secondly*, the wording of that role as revealer sounds uncannily like something from the Fourth Gospel and, indeed, may be one of the inspirations behind the language and ideas in John’s Gospel.