

## Synopsis of OT XXVI [A] Sunday (October 1) Homily on Mt 21: 28-32 Fr. Tony Kadavil

**Introduction:** Today's Scripture passages warn us that it is our final decision for or against God, that is, our choosing to obey Him gracefully by doing His will or our choosing to go against His will, which will decide our eternal reward or eternal punishment. As free beings, it is we who choose our eternal destiny.

**Scripture lessons:** In the first reading, the Lord God, through His prophet, Ezekiel, corrects the Jewish beliefs that children inherit the guilt of their ancestors and are punished for it and that God is more strict than merciful. God explains that His mercy overrules strict justice and that He will punish us only for our sins, not for the sins of our ancestors. Today's Responsorial Psalm (Ps 25) appeals to God's compassion and mercy, begging Him to wipe away our sins and extend mercy to us. The second reading, Paul's Letter to the Philippians, also affirms the truth that the final choice for God, made by perfect obedience to Him, will be rewarded. Paul emphasizes the fact that it is because of Christ's obedience to God's will by *emptying himself, taking human form* and humbling himself by accepting death on a cross that God the Father *exalted Christ, bestowed on him the Name above every other name*, and made Jesus the recipient of universal adoration.

In the parable in today's Gospel, a man with two sons tells both to go out to work in the vineyard. The first son says he won't go, but later regrets it and works. The second son says he will go but does not. In each case, it is the final decision that is more important. Jesus teaches through this short parable that repentant tax-collectors and prostitutes, represented by the first son who initially refused to go, will make their way into the Kingdom of God before the chief priests and the elders, represented by the second son in the parable. By their pride and their refusal to obey God's call to repentance, the scribes and the Pharisees are excluding themselves, while the tax-collectors and sinners whom they despised are repenting of their sins and will be accepted into God's Kingdom.

**Life messages: (1) We need to do God's will every day:** Each one of us is responsible to God for every one of our actions, and the just God will punish or reward each individual according to our actions. Since we are not sure about the moment of our death, our only guarantee of dying in God's friendship is to live in that friendship always, saying "Yes," to God by doing His will.

**2) It is never too late for us to repent, be converted and allow the Holy Spirit to renew our life:** If we have been disobedient to God in our past life, we need to knock at the door of God's mercy. God can, and will, do for us what, in his mercy, He, did for the repentant tax-collectors and harlots in the parable and in real life. Hence, every night we need to repent of our sins and ask God's pardon. If we are in serious sin we also to be reconciled with God, the Church and our brothers and sisters through the Sacrament

of Reconciliation, in order to be able to receive Jesus Holy Communion. Let us remember that it is never too late for us to turn back to God.

**O.T. XXVI [A] (Oct 1) Ez 18:25-28; Phil 2:1-11; Mt 21:28-32**

**Homily starter anecdotes: 1) Rigorous Arabian horse training:** Arabian horses go through rigorous training in the deserts of the Middle East. The trainers demand absolute obedience from the horses, and test them to see if they are completely trained. The final test is almost beyond the endurance of any living thing. The trainer forces the horses to do without water for many days. Then he turns them loose and of course they start running toward the water, but just as they get to the edge, ready to plunge in and drink, the trainer blows his whistle. The horses who have been completely trained and who have learned perfect obedience stop. They turn around and come pacing back to the trainer. They stand there quivering, wanting water, but they wait in perfect obedience. When the trainer is sure that he has their obedience, he gives them a signal to go back to drink. Now this may be severe but when you are on the trackless desert of Arabia and your life is entrusted to a horse, you had better have a trained, obedient horse. We must accept God's training and obey Him in words and deeds as demanded by the short parable in today's Gospel.

**2) "Tell that woman that I want her here in the White House."** Professor John Kenneth Galbraith, the world-famous Harvard economist and author of four dozen books and over a thousand articles, also served as economic advisor to four American presidents. In his autobiography, *A Life in Our Times*, Galbraith illustrates the devotion of Emily Gloria Wilson, his family's housekeeper: "It had been a wearying day, and I asked Emily to hold all telephone calls while I had a nap. Shortly thereafter the phone rang. President Lyndon Johnson was calling from the White House. "Get me Ken Galbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson." "He is sleeping, Mr. President. He has instructed me not to disturb him." "Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him." "No, Mr. President. I work for him, not you." When I called the President back, he could scarcely control his pleasure. "Tell that woman that I want her here in the White House." Today's Gospel reminds us that perfect and graceful obedience to God is real love, and so is more rewarding than reluctant obedience.

**3) Blind obedience:** How we admire the obedience a dog shows to its master! Archibald Rutledge, the American story-teller wrote that one day he met a man whose dog had just been killed in a forest fire. Heartbroken, the man explained to Rutledge how it happened. Because he worked outdoors, he often took his dog with him. That morning, he left the animal in a clearing and gave him a command to stay and watch his lunch bucket while he went into the forest. His faithful friend understood, for that's exactly what he did. Then a fire started in the woods, and soon the blaze spread to the spot where the dog had been left. But he didn't move. He stayed right where he was, in perfect obedience to his master's word. Later with tearful eyes, the dog's owner said, "I always had to be careful what I told him to do, because I knew he would do it." This,

and more, is the kind of obedience to which Christ has called us. The short parable in today's

**Introduction:** Today's Scripture passages warn us that it is our final decision for or against God that is most important because we are rewarded or punished according to it. In the first reading, Ezekiel's message from the Lord God to Israel answers the objections of those who think it is not fair that God should give such weight to one's final decision because a person who, after a very long virtuous life, finally chooses sin will be punished and another, who finally chooses virtue after a life of loose morals, will be rewarded. Today's Responsorial Psalm (Ps 25), appeals to God's compassion and mercy, begging Him to wipe away our sins and extend mercy to us. The second reading, taken from Paul's Letter to the Philippians, also affirms the truth that the final choice for God, made by perfect obedience to Him, will be rewarded. Paul emphasizes the fact that it is because of Christ's obedience to God's will, *emptying himself, taking human form* and humbling himself by accepting death on a cross, that God the Father *exalted Christ, bestowed on him the name above every other name*, and made Jesus the recipient of universal adoration. In the parable in today's Gospel, a man with two sons tells both to go out to work in the vineyard. The first son says he won't go, but later regrets it and works. The second son says he will go but does not. In each case, it is the final decision that is more important. Repentant tax-collectors and prostitutes, represented by the first son who initially refused to go, will make their way into the Kingdom of God before the chief priests and the elders, represented by the second son in the parable.

**The first reading (Ez 18:25-28) explained:** In chapter 18, the Lord God, through His prophet, Ezekiel, challenges two old beliefs common among His people: that children inherit the guilt of their ancestors and are punished for it, and that God is more strict than merciful. Here, the Lord God declares His option for personal responsibility, which means each person is to be rewarded or punished according to his or her individual actions, not for someone else's. In today's passage, Ezekiel answers the objection raised by the Jewish slaves in Babylon, "Our ancestors sinned, but we are punished, and so God is not fair!" God's message is that His mercy overrules strict justice, and He doesn't hold our past against us. Hence, if God is "not fair," it is to our advantage, because He doesn't hold the past against us and always gives us another chance. In the same chapter of Ezekiel, God returns this "not fair" accusation, asking the House of Israel if their ways are "fair" when they turn from God's love to serve false gods and their own false sense of what life is.

We, too, often think that it is not fair for God to reward or punish one based only on one's final option for God or against God, without considering one's lifetime indulgence in vices or lifetime practice of virtues. The prophecy's response is that God always gives people a chance to change and to accept the consequences of that change. The Lord further explains that it is possible for a wicked person to renounce his sins, begin respecting God's law, and live an upright life. Such a person will not die but live, and

God will not remember any of his crimes against him. Likewise, it is possible for a good person to turn away from uprightness and to forfeit the favor of God and neighbor. Such a person's past good deeds will be "forgotten from then on," and he shall die for his sins, unless, of course, he repents and turns back to God. The Good News is that God is always ready to forgive; we need only show willingness to accept God's forgiveness through our forgiveness of each other.

**The second reading (Phil 2:1-11) explained:** Here, citing Jesus as the supreme model of obedience to the Father's will, St. Paul also affirms the truth that those who make the final choice for God will be rewarded. Using lines from a hymn of early Christian belief which existed long before Paul penned his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle reminds his community of their obligation to look to others' interests rather than their own (Phil 2:1-11). As the hymn states, they need only take Jesus as their model for such behavior, because Jesus obeyed his Father completely, *emptying himself, taking human form* and humbling himself by accepting death on a cross. Paul emphasizes the fact that it is because of Christ's loving obedience to the Father's will that God the Father *exalted Christ, bestowed on him the Name above every other name*, and made Jesus the recipient of universal adoration. The message is that if we are united with Christ in his faithful obedience to God, we will also share his glory. Paul adds that such faithfulness and obedience to God demand that "*we do nothing out of selfishness or vainglory.*" Instead, we should "*humbly regard others as more important*" than ourselves, "*each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others.*" The hymn exemplifies the "mind" of Christ that we must "put on" when we face each other, which means that we will find joy and consolation only when we die to ourselves.

**Gospel Exegesis: The context:** Jesus has now entered Jerusalem, the scene of all the Passion events he has predicted. When he reaches the Temple – the most religiously sensitive area for all of Judaism – Jesus becomes furious and drives out the merchants and money-changers (Matthew 21:12). It is not surprising, then, that the "chief priests and elders" should show great concern and great caution about Jesus' presence in the Temple. That is why Jesus addressed this parable to those (v. 23) who approached him while he taught in the Temple and asked for his credentials: "*By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*" The parable of the two sons serves Jesus as a master strategy for defending his honor and presenting a counter-challenge to his adversaries. The purpose of this parable was to give a wake-up call to the chief priests and elders. The parable hints that their position as leaders of the Chosen People and their observance of Mosaic Law give them no guarantee that they will possess the Kingdom of God. Rather, because of their pride and their refusal to obey God's call to repentance, they will exclude themselves from that Kingdom, while the tax-collectors and sinners, whom they despise, repenting of their sins and obeying Him, will be welcomed by Him into the Kingdom.

**The parable and its meaning:** The title that Barclay gives to this story is "The Better of Two Bad Sons." Jesus presents two sons in this parable as he does in the parable of the

Prodigal Son. Here, the first son is asked to go into the vineyard, but he says "No." He later changes his mind and goes. The second says "Yes, sir," but does not go. Jesus then asks his listeners which of the two did the father's will. They answer, "The first", and their correct answer strengthens Jesus' case against them. The message of the story is crystal clear. There are two very common classes of people in this world. First, there are those like the parable's first-asked son, whose practice is far better than their profession. Second, there are the people like the second-asked son, whose profession is much better than their practice. While the first class should be preferred to the second, neither is anything like perfect, because the really good man is the man in whom profession and practice meet and match. The ideal son in this parable would be one who accepted the father's orders with grace and respect and who unquestioningly and fully carried them out as Jesus obeyed his Father's orders.

Further, this parable teaches us that promises can never take the place of performance, and fine words are never a substitute for fine deeds. In other words, the parable clearly teaches that the Christian Way is followed in performance, not in promise alone, and that the mark of a Christian is obedience, graciously and courteously given. We are not supposed to say "yes" to God on Sundays and "no" to God on weekdays. God doesn't want polite but hypocritical words, for that isn't obedience at all. "*Merciful and quick to forgive,*" God tolerates willful, even blasphemous disobedience, provided repentance follows. God remains faithful, always ready to receive repentant sinners. He never abandons us even when we abandon Him.

**The twofold application of the parable:** (1) This parable, found only in Matthew, outlines two responses to God's call. The first son says, "I will not," but changes his mind and does what is needed. The second son says, "I go, sir," but does not go. Verses 31-32 make it clear that the tax collectors and prostitutes are the first son, and the chief priests and elders are the second son. When John the Baptist called people to repent, tax collectors and prostitutes repented and were baptized. It was easy for them to repent, because their sins were obvious, even to themselves. The religious leaders, however, were not able, or ready, to admit their need for repentance, and therefore they rejected John and his call. So also, they rejected Jesus. We are reminded of Jesus' words earlier 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*" (7:21). The life-saving difference between the two sons was the fact that one had the good sense to remember the love of his father, to turn from evil and decide to do what was right.

(2) Today, the first son, the faithful son, has still another face -- a repentant alcoholic, a small band of worshipers in a storefront, a Church that reaches out to the needy in its community, a Pastor who calls parishioners to true repentance, a Church member who decides to tithe, a young person who decides to remain abstinent until marriage -- all people who, however reluctantly or painfully, obey Christ. The second son is now the

person in the pew who refuses Christ entry into his or her heart and life -- a Christian who refuses to obey Christ in the sensitive areas of sex, money, and power; a Preacher whose sermon is designed to please people rather than to please God; a Church that ignores issues of justice and mercy; a Sunday School that neglects to teach children the great Biblical stories -- in short, all people who appear to be faithful but, down deep, are not.

**Life messages: (1) We need to lead a responsible Christian life, saying “yes” to God.** Each one of us is responsible to God for every one of our actions, and the just God will punish or reward each of us according to our actions. As we do not know the moment death will strike us, our only guarantee of dying in God's friendship is to live in that friendship always, saying “Yes” to God in our deeds. We should become men and women who profess our Faith in word and deed, remembering that, *"Not all those who say to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but those who do the will of my Father who is in Heaven"* (Matthew 7:21). God is ever with us to strengthen us and to pardon and lift us up again when through human weakness we stumble on the road. God is calling us right now, inviting us to work in His vineyard, inviting us to say “Yes” to Him with our words and actions. Let us accept God's invitation by purifying our hearts in the Sacrament of Reconciliation; by resolving to act upon our promises each morning before we get out of bed; and by declaring interiorly that people will be able to identify us as followers of Christ, not by empty words or pious gestures but simply by our Christian actions. In this way, we shall live a life filled with the joy that doing the will of the Father brings.

**2) Instead of trusting in lame excuses, we need to seek God's mercy.** We often use flimsy excuses to silence our conscience. They run like this: “I didn't realize how sinful I was”; “I was just too busy with work, family and a decent social life to have time for Sunday Mass”; “That's what all my family does - it's got to be OK!” ; “The devil made me do it - it wasn't my fault!”; ““I couldn't be different from everyone else – I'd look stupid!”; “I meant to straighten things out - I just didn't get to it.” These are not valid excuses at the judgment seat of God. Hence, if we have been disobedient to God in our past life, we need to knock at the door of God's mercy. We need to remember that what God in his mercy did for the tax-collectors and harlots in the parable, the Matthews, the Augustines, the Margarets of Cortona, and the millions of unknown penitents who are now Saints in Heaven, He can, and will, do for us, if we repent of our past sins and renew our lives as the first-asked son in the parable did. It is never too late for us to be transformed.

## **JOKE OF THE WEEK**

1) A Non-Catholic Minister recently quit the ministry after more than 20 years of faithful, dedicated service and became a funeral director. When asked why he had changed vocations, he said: “I spent 10 years trying to straighten out John and he's still

an alcoholic. Then I spent three and one-half years trying to straighten out Harold and Susan's marriage problems and they ended up getting a divorce. Later I tried for two years to help Bob kick his drug habit and he is still an addict. Now, at the funeral home, when I straighten them out, they stay straight! Perfect obedience!"

2) One night an Admiral on a US Navy Battleship ordered a certain course. The navigation officer, seeing a light in the distance, reported that the battleship now seemed to be on a collision course with another ship. So, the Admiral ordered his radio officer to send a message to the on-coming ship that it should change its course 10 degrees to the south. The reply came simply, "Change your course 10 degrees to the north." After two more unsuccessful exchanges, the Admiral, now quite furious, came thundering into the radio control room, grabbed the microphone, and bellowed into it, "Do you know that you are talking to an ADMIRAL in the UNITED STATES NAVY?!" After a brief moment of silence, the even-tempered reply came back, "This is a lighthouse; alter your course 10 degrees to the North." So, when God's Word asks us to do something and we wonder why, we need to remember Whom we're talking to! If we want to avoid disaster in this life and the next, we really need to obey His orders!