

Trinity 17

Which is the best thing to say? Yes no.. or no yes?

I suppose it depends what your saying yes or no to. But if saying yes is saying yes to the right thing, then no yes, is better than yes no. So saying, yes no or no yes, is not just a funny way of talking, it's about actions. Saying Yes to doing the right things, rather than 'no' to not doing them.

If we say yes to doing the right things, but then our promise to do them bears no fruit, ie, we don't do what we said yes to, then effectively we've gone from 'yes' to 'no'. So we're 'yes' 'no' people. Far better I think to be 'no' 'yes' people, where we say no to doing the right thing but then after some thought, effectively say 'yes', by doing the right thing. It would be even better to say 'yes' 'yes', but that's asking too much of most of us.

Our gospel reading today from Matthew, contains the parable of the two sons. Their father goes to the first and says, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today. And he answers, 'I will not'. However, the son in question thinks better of this and after repenting, he goes and works in his father's vineyard. The father then goes to his second son and asks him to go into the vineyard to work. The answer is a yes, 'I go sir'. Well that's the sort of answer you want to hear. Is it going to be a 'yes' 'yes'? Well sadly the second son says 'yes' and then 'no', because he doesn't go and work in his father's vineyard.

But what's it all about, this parable of the two sons? Is Jesus trying to teach people how to behave in their relation to others. To be people of their word? Well such things are commendable and saying yes in the right circumstances and meaning it, is helpful in human relationships. Jesus however, as with all his parables, is telling the story to get across a much deeper message. A message where there is a real world of difference between saying yes and doing a no, or saying no, but doing a yes.

Jewish leaders, chief priests and elders of the people, come up to Jesus as he is teaching in the temple. The said people are people of good standing. They are respected by the people, they have an amount of authority, they are very religious. They are thus, people who have said 'yes' to God in their lives and socially and visibly they are marked with a big 'yes'. But the chief priests and the elders, do not like the assumption made, that Jesus is the son of David and a prophet. Jesus, the man who rode into Jerusalem on an ass and colt, troubles them. Jesus has turned people out of the temple and healed others in the temple. He is a threat to them and the whole order of religious life and social/ community order.

Is Jesus' authority to do these things an authority which God has given him, or has Jesus just assumed it himself? It would seem the leaders favour the latter. They want to test Jesus though and look for ways to catch him out.

Whilst Jesus is teaching they say to him.

'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'

Do they get a straight answer? Well not as they would have wished. Jesus as he often does, challenges them by answering with a question. He says.

'I also will ask you a question; and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?'

The religious leaders had to argue this one out. If they say 'from heaven' then Jesus will ask them why they did not believe the message of John the Baptist. But if they say John's baptism was of human origin, they would upset many of their people, who believed the message of John the Baptist and revered him as a prophet.

The answer they gave to Jesus therefore was. 'We do not know.' And Jesus said, 'neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'

Jesus then goes on to tell the parable of the two sons, which may on first hearing, feel a bit confusing. Why has Jesus gone on to this, the listener might ask. After telling the parable, Jesus says to the chief priest and elders.

'Which of the two did the will of the Father? The one who said no externally but said yes in his heart and in his actions. Or the one who said yes externally but no in his actual response. The answer was, the first one. What else could they say?

But the story is much deeper. Jesus had led them, in a subtle sort of way, into a situation where they were actually saying something about themselves. That would have been good if they were like the first son, but because of their unbelief, they were like the second son.

By their status and religiousness in all they did and observed in terms of religious law and worship, the chief priests and elders had said yes to God. But in their response to John the Baptist, the one who cried out in the wilderness for people to repent as he prepared the way of the Lord, they had really followed 'yes' with a big 'no'. For they did not believe John the Baptist and in doing this they were not going to believe Jesus. Jesus was saying to them... the very God they had said 'yes' to, was the one who had sent John and then Jesus to Israel, but they had not accepted them. Far better as Jesus points out, to be like the sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. Yes, they had done much wrong in their lives and in their sinfulness they had said 'no' to God. But for many sinners, it was a 'no' that turned to 'yes' when they heard the word first of John and then Jesus and received it into their hearts. For they repented, like the first son and were responding to God's call.

Is there anything in this for us? Well of course there is. We too can choose either of the options. It's quite easy to say yes to God. It's quite possible to appear to be a Christian and be seen as one who is following God's way. But are we really saying 'yes'? Or is it just lip service with no real action to follow it up. When we say 'yes' with our lips, are we truly saying yes to the God who revealed himself to us in the Son. The God who wants to dwell in our hearts and live in our actions, Are we willing to labour and toil in his vineyard and make a world that says 'yes' to the glory of God?

Amen.