

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## The Need To Decide

The parable of the two sons sent to the vineyard is aimed at Pharisees, who claimed not to be able to decide about John the Baptist. Jesus asked them to say whether John's baptism came from heaven or not; they said, *We do not know*. Jesus tells them that if they refuse to make a judgement about John, they need not expect to be allowed to pass judgement on Jesus.

### What Is Your Opinion?

That question is the beginning of the parable; and I suppose we can have opinions, even about things which concern us very little. That is not the case here. Jesus seems always to have the power to provoke momentous questions, to put people on the spot. He does not get concerned in petty and irrelevant details of life or religion. He goes for central, dominant realities. What the Pharisees find to say about John the Baptist and about Jesus is vitally important, a matter of life and death. From the beginning of the Gospel Jesus has insisted on the necessity for us to commit ourselves one way or the other. There's also a powerful theme of the importance of deeds rather than words. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: *It is not the one who calls me "Lord, Lord!" who will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven*. It is interesting that, in this parable, the second son calls his father *kyrie*, which is translated here as *Sir*, but also means *Lord*; so here is a living example of the principle - a man who says "Lord", but does not do the will of his father. The words are all present and correct, but the deeds are not. Here Jesus is digging deep into the tender parts of the Pharisees. He no longer even pretends to believe them in their claim *not to know* about John the Baptist; he says plainly: *You refused to think better of it and believe in him*. They did indeed make a decision, they *refused* to believe. Jesus unmasks their pretence of ignorance, and likens them to the disobedient son, and calls them lower than the lowest in society; how these would-be puritans would have resented being relegated in favour of public sinners! I never meet the Pharisees in the Sunday Gospels without wanting to go to their rescue. They are much maligned in the Gospels, because these were written in the days when the Pharisees had become The Enemy. I don't think Jesus saw them like this; as people fastidious for the keeping of the Law, as people horrified by evil, and as people who tried to take

their religion seriously hour by hour, they had much in common with Jesus and must have heard the Sermon on the Mount with great joy. But in their refusal of John the Baptist they showed a lack of freedom and courage which Jesus the Prophet would have found disgraceful.

### Go To The Vineyard Today

*The vineyard* is the place where the Father has work for us. We too are told to go and get on with it. There is much to be done in the world; and we say every morning the prayer of the faithful son: *thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven*. This, also, is a quotation from the Gospel of Matthew. It's a big, even a dangerous, prayer, and simply by saying it we put ourselves on the same spot as the two sons in the parable. As a missionary Sister told us once, it depends whether you think your baptismal certificate is a ticket to heaven, or, as she suggested, a work-permit. To pray *Thy will be done* means actually doing the will of God ourselves; it would be a dishonest prayer if, having said the words, we allowed our own lives to become indifferent to the will of God or actually contrary to it.

### The Simple Power of the Parables

The Gospel has many ways of reflecting the truths of Christ. The stories work on multiple levels. In Gethsemane - where a Son struggled mortally with the demands of his father's will - there was a press where olives were processed to yield their oil, with which people are *anointed*, made into *messiahs*. A bottle of oil is a quiet, very beautiful, finished product. But an oilpress is a place of violence, where the fruit is crushed and destroyed for its gift to be released. It is a place of destruction. Jesus, prostrate on the earth, was the Anointed One contemplating the Cross that will destroy him. The Gospel hangs together; perhaps it is not fanciful to see in this earthly vineyard - where our obedience must be given to God - the place where the wine of our Eucharist must be grown and pressed: of which he said: *This is my blood*.

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