

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

The parable in this Sunday's gospel describes a situation which all of us will immediately recognise. Those of you who are parents will empathise with the father of the two sons, but all of us – whether we be a son or a daughter – will find a good deal of ourselves and recognise regular patterns of our own behaviour in both of the young men. Most of us get annoyed when people say they will do something for us and then fail to deliver on their promises. Yet we all recognise that we too fail in this regard. There is something of the second son in all of us. Our 'yes' can become a 'no' in practice. There may be many reasons for this. We may say 'yes' to keep someone happy, without ever really intending to follow up on what we are asked. Or some of us may find it hard to say 'no'. We may tend to say 'yes' to every request and have the intention of following through, even though we could not possibly do all we promise to do.

If there can be something of the second son in all of us, there can also be something of the first son as well. We have often dug in our heels and said 'no' to a request but then, having thought it over, changed our mind. Our first reactions have not always been our best ones. They do not always express what, deep down, we really intend. We all struggle with various forms of self-centredness, and sometimes our initial 'no' comes out of that. We might initially say 'no' to avoid what we think will be difficult or demanding. Yet when we think back over our 'no', we come to realise that it has not done us justice. We recognise that saying 'yes' would be more in keeping with what we desire in the depths of our being. It is this willingness to change our 'no' into a 'yes' that Jesus is trying to encourage by means of the parable of the two sons. It is addressed to those who have said 'no' to John the Baptist and to Jesus and who show no sign of changing their 'no' into a 'yes.' The religious leaders had not only rejected the appeal of John and Jesus, but having seen how tax collectors and prostitutes had responded to John and Jesus, they refused to think better of their 'no.' They persisted in saying 'no' to God's invitation, even though something was happening which should have given them reasons to reconsider their initial negative response.

The parable indicates that the Lord is not put off by an initial 'no.' What does trouble him is a persistent 'no', an ongoing refusal to reconsider our initial negative response. Indeed, the parable suggests that the Lord can put up with a lot of 'no's on the way to the final 'yes.' He is prepared to keep on knocking, as long as there is some prospect that sooner or later we will respond. In these difficult coronavirus days many requests are made of us to do things for which either we have no appetite or which run against the grain. And yet we have seen in our church community and neighbourhoods just how willing people are to turn an initial 'no' into a generous 'yes', especially when they see how much vulnerable individuals or a community under siege can benefit from a positive response.

Father Patrick