

Reflection for the Twenty Sixth Sunday of the Church's Year.

The incident in today's gospel took place on the Monday of Holy Week. We need to bear this in mind if we are to fully understand the significance of today's gospel. Relationships between Jesus and "*the chief priests and the elders of the people*" are at breaking point and so the exchange which took place on that Monday morning was tense and hostile. It was not a cosy little chat or a sharing of views but really a 'full on' attack by Jesus directed at the chief priest and elders.

Jesus likens the behaviour of the "*chief priests and elders of the people*" to that of the second son asked to "*work in the vineyard.*" The second son has all the outward appearances of being dutiful but, in reality, is duplicitous and disobedient. On the other hand, the first son initially refused to go to work in the vineyard but "*afterwards thought better of it and went*", just like the tax collectors and prostitutes who, upon hearing the message of John the Baptist, have had second thoughts and have repented. And so, Jesus is asserting that the "*chief priests and elders*" come a very poor second to the tax collectors and prostitutes. This is, indeed, a scathing, bruising and hard-hitting attack by Jesus on the "*chief priests and elders of the people.*"

The depth of the betrayal by the "*chief priests and elders*" is all the more significant when we remember the relationship between the man who owns the vineyard and those he asks to work in it. The owner is the father and they are his "*sons*"— not servants or hired men - but "*sons*" with filial responsibilities and ties. They are also the ones who stand to inherit the rewards of the vineyard. So, it can be seen that the betrayal and failure of the second son is all the more painful and offensive.

Of course, Jesus is wanting "*the chief priests and the elders of the people*" to see something deeper than an illustration about difficult family relationships. Jesus wants them to understand that "*the man who had two sons*" represents God himself and that the chosen people, and themselves as its "*chief priests and elders*", are in the position of sons. They are probably shocked to hear Jesus describe "*tax collectors and prostitutes*" as enjoying the same close relationship with God as themselves and they would have been mightily offended to hear that "*the tax collectors and prostitutes*" were entering "*the kingdom of God*" before them. And Jesus has these harsh words of condemnation because of two things. Firstly, they did not believe John the Baptist who came to them "*in the way of righteousness.*" And secondly, they have not reflected on the example of the tax collectors and prostitutes who did believe John, and consequently the "*chief priests and elders*" did "*not afterwards change their minds*" and come to belief. They have persisted in their folly, refused to reflect on their mistakes and attitudes, and so have failed to repent and amend their behaviour.

As tensions build in Holy Week between Jesus and the religious authorities, Jesus is still at pains, even in this confrontation, to bring about a change of heart in them. As we read the parable today, a similar opportunity to amend our ways is offered to us.