

Proper 21 A Matt 21:23-32 Philippians 2:1-13

In the current weekend edition of the WSJ there is a fascinating article about the notorious, and some would say quintessential Italian, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

If nothing else, you have to admire Berlusconi's cheeky humor. When confronted with the evidence of his serial adulteries, the columnist quotes Berlusconi as quipping,

“Am I faithful? Frequently!”

The writer goes on; “Mr. Berlusconi is convinced that, in a nation obsessed with appearances, image is the key. In Italy, making the right impression (“la bella figura”) too often prevails over doing the right thing.”

Jesus cared little if at all for *la bella figura*, about making a right first impression.

If there had been some kind of inquest into Jesus' death, I would imagine that the parable of the two brothers would have been cited as one of the things that got him killed.

The way Matthew sets up this story it is told during the last week of his life. Jesus had stolen, or borrowed, a donkey for a ride into town, had chased the merchants out of the temple, thrown furniture around, cursed the fig tree for failing to bear fruit, and following this unusual behavior, he went back into the temple to teach.

And that is where the chief priests and elders cornered him.

They had a single question: who do you think you are? Just how is it that you have the authority to do all these things, to come barreling in here to cause something that looks a lot like civil disobedience?

It was Passover time when throngs of pilgrims are streaming into Jerusalem to celebrate God's liberation of Israel from foreign oppressors. The Roman authorities were understandably jumpy.

Who, they wanted to know, do you think you are?

In response Jesus did something very typical of him. Instead of answering them he asked them a question, what do you think? And then he told them a story.

Jesus never gave a straight answer when he could tell a story. He must have known that it is more effective if people come up with the answers themselves, so he went to the extra trouble of helping them do that, even if it could backfire on him.

The story he told the elders and chiefs that day was about two brothers who could not decide if they wanted to answer yes or no.

These brothers are old enough to work in their father's vineyard but still working on their relationship with their father.

When their father asked them to work in the vineyard the first son said he would not go but later changed his mind and went.

The second brother in the story said 'yes sir, I will do as you ask,' but later on failed to do so.

Which brother, the yes brother or the no brother, Jesus asks, did the will of his father? It was easy to answer, of course. It was the first brother, because in the end he actually did what was asked of him. What the sons did was what finally mattered.

But that was not the part of the truth that got Jesus killed.

What got him killed was the second part, when he told the chief priests and elders which brother they were. They were the yes guys who said all the right things, believed all the right things, possibly to create a good initial impression, to please and impress, but who would not do the right things God asked them to do.

They might have thought that they were doing the right thing, but they had grown so attached to their own ideas about what those right things were that they could not consider correction.

John the Baptist and then Jesus suggested to them that they swap their accumulated beliefs for a fresh experience of God, but that was asking too much.

They said yes to God while they acted out a great big NO to Jesus, who suggested they might be in for a great big surprise.

The big unwelcome surprise, Jesus says, was that the prostitutes and tax collectors were going into the kingdom ahead of them, not instead but ahead of them. They were people who may have said no at the beginning but who changed their minds and went to work, while those who refused to go to work continued to mistake their own convictions for obedience to God!

These were the ones who flamed to brightness at the start but were a mere ember at the end.

Rather, it was the folks who made off-putting, negative first impressions - the prostitutes and tax collectors, those who do not have places at the lead table of the Junior League benefit ball – they will be ushered to the front row/stage right box seats at the opening night of the Metropolitan Opera!

At this point we can imagine seeing clouds of steam coming out of the ears of the chief priests and elders with considerable force!

So, on the one hand, just another story about hypocrisy, often charged against religious people, making impressive claims of belief straight off, but saying one thing and doing

something else – claiming love for each other on Sunday but ignoring and cheating and slandering one another like everyone else on Monday. Pretending goodness to gain advantage over other people. Wearing the “fake fur of faith” to fool others. On the other hand it doesn’t seem that conscious pretence is the real problem here.

The greater concern may well be the unconscious ways we may substitute avowed beliefs and intentions about God, for our obedience to God, as if it were enough to say “I go, sir,” without flexing a muscle to break out of our familiar and comforting routines.

How do such patterns start?

They could begin in our imagining that we have actually done good things toward God that we have only thought of doing.

Setting aside the God relationship for a moment, and think about our everyday life. Have any of us ever given thought to visiting a sick friend, rehearsed what we might talk about, then decided on sending a card or a note instead, thinking what a fitting gesture that might be, been pleased with ourselves at such thoughtfulness, and in the end let it go at that?

I trust that I am not the only one present who has done that.

I have even later on had difficulty remembering if I actually wrote the note or not. You see, I am the kind of person who not only thinks that it is a good thing to do, but also believe that I am the kind of person who does things like that. But sometimes I do not.

It feels so good to have the intention, to imagine myself following through with it, to have all the wonderful sweetness of the possibility sucked right out of the idea, and then to merely swallow it.

It is rather easy for us to confuse beliefs with actions, to get them mixed up.

We probably know a number of persons who honestly do believe that they love their families above all else, but actually spend very little, or too little, time with them.

Maybe we know of six or more persons who believe that the environment should be protected but drive cars that get less than 12 miles to the gallon.

I think I could find at least ten persons, beginning with myself, who decry violence in our movies and on our TV but who will cue up for the coming remake of the movie “Straw Dogs.”

And it is likely that without a lot of effort you could find a small clutch of persons who are all for the American way and preserving our way of life, who are not registered to vote.

On a different scale, can any of us count the number of strong declarations of yes to proposals for the peace of Jerusalem have been made at photo-ops in the Rose Garden and in Oslo and elsewhere that have ended up to be weaseling no’s?

It is a clouded-over, hazy, peculiar, largely internal thing, this distance we all know between what we profess to believe and what we actually end up doing.

There is a painfully accurate theological word for the heart of it – sin, trespass, missing the mark – that someone has characterized as “both inevitable and forgivable but never tolerable for those who love God.”

When God and God’s intention for human life is the mark we are missing, the vacuum is just too tragic and painful to bear.

It tears us up to say one thing and do another, as we all know. It tears up our families, our friendships, our families, our communities, our world, when we claim love and act with indifference, or say “I will go” and go nowhere at all.

Our faith-claims have no meaning apart from what we do about them and with them.

One preacher writes, “There is not a creed or a mission statement in the world that is worth one visit to a sick friend, or one cup of water held out to someone who is longing for it.”

Maybe you have seen the film or read Isak Dinesen’s book *Out of Africa*. She tells the story of a young Kikuyu boy named Kitau who appeared at her door in Nairobi one day to ask if he might work for her. She said yes and he turned out to be a fine servant, but after just three months he came to her to ask for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim in Mombasa. Upset at the thought of losing him, she offered to raise Kitau’s pay, but he was firm about leaving.

He had decided, he told her, that he would become either a Christian or a Muslim, and that his whole purpose in coming to live with her had been to see the ways and habits of Christians up close. Next he would go live for three months with Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behaved, and then he would make up his mind.

Aghast, Dinesen wrote, “I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had these facts before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said, ‘Good God, Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here!’ ”

God makes a practice of not telling us ahead of time. Or maybe more to the point, God has been telling us all along – that there is no shortage of people who say or believe or stand for all the right things. There has always been plenty of those in the world.

What God seems short of are people who will go where God calls them and do what God gives them to do – even, say, when it goes against their beliefs, or maybe against *la bella figura*, right impressions.

As Soren Kierkegaard writes, Jesus wants followers, not admirers.

Whether we say yes or no to him is apparently less important to him than what we actually do.

The important thing is what our lives say, and our lives are as easy for most people to read as the story of the brothers.

To tell which one we are, we can look in any mirror, and ask our selves, “What is moving? Our mouths or our feet?”