

Sunday Homily

16TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

27 SEPTEMBER 2020

YEAR A

“Which of the two did the will of his father?”

Matthew 21:31

Introduction

Perhaps it's blindingly obvious to say that those who invest much in something have the most to lose if that something is threatened. This can be true of the stock market or the horses, but perhaps it applies most to the things even closer to our hearts. The children in whom we have invested so much love, care and money, fly the nest and leave us bereft. Longed-for retirement makes us feel lost and useless. The job that we sweated over is taken away and given to someone else. The family home that we laboured to make into a secure haven is shattered by divorce or death. The friendship that we treasured turns out to be one-sided. The Church that we are devoted to is torn apart by divisions or change.

The things we love, that we care for, or that we consider important enough to invest the best of ourselves into, these are the things that will cause the most anxiety and that stir up the most ferocious battles – and that lead, if those battles are lost, to the most dreadful hurt and despair. You invest much in something, you stand to lose much. It's one of the truths of life. If you don't invest, then you don't stand to lose so much. But what kind of life would that be?

Gospel Teaching

In our reading from Matthew's Gospel we are seeing the actions and words of a group of people who have invested much in their faith and community, but who are feeling increasingly threatened by looming change. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem with shouts of “Hosanna!” in his ears, and he has provocatively overthrown the tables of the money changers in the Temple.

His actions echo the message of his whole ministry: soon the establishment will come tumbling down and a new order will begin. There is trouble afoot, and the authorities know it, which is why we read today of their increasing conflict with Jesus as they try and slow him down, catch him out and eventually – in a few chapters' time – condemn him to death. They challenge Jesus' authority to do the things he is doing – a challenge which Jesus answers only indirectly, before going on the attack.

His tiny but powerful parable of the son who says he'll go and doesn't, versus the one who says he won't and does, is, as Jesus makes quite clear, a description of how the chief priests and elders – the cream of the local society and faith community – are blind to the Good News. But the prostitutes and collaborators – very much not the cream of anything – have heard the message and welcomed it.

For those who were disgraceful, failed and unacceptable, Jesus' message was one of inclusion and grace. Society invested little in these people, and they could invest little back, which is perhaps why they had the clarity of vision to enable them to see Jesus' message as uniquely good. The authorities, the respectable, the wealthy and the well-to-do had invested much in the system, and so had much, much more to lose.

Looking back on those times, it's easy to see who's right. But let's spare a thought for those people who invested much. These were not bad people. They worked towards order, stability and faithful commitment. They kept the rules – the rules given by God. How painful and confusing to find things turned on their head. Truly, those who have invested the most have the most to lose.

Application

Surely this is a lesson we can never afford to stop learning. We quite rightly invest time, love, attention and money in the things we consider to be the most important. Our Church and our faith are among these things. But that loving investment can also make us blind sometimes to the necessity for change, to the need to look afresh at what we do. This is particularly the case when those on the edges – the ones who don't have as much invested in the way things are – start making suggestions and changes. Or when their very presence demands that we do something different.

As faithful Christians, we should invest in good things. But the double-edged sword of the Gospel means that we can never be sure that we will not be called upon to adapt and even dismantle the very thing we treasured the most. And this is not about gathering ammunition to attack others, it's about challenging ourselves. Let's pray for the courage to face the call, when it comes.