

## Conversion of mind, heart, spirit

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – 27 September 2020

World Day of Migrants and Refugees

Readings: Ezek 18:25-28; Phil 2:1-11; Mt 21:28-32

*“He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went”* (Mt 21:29)

Prologue: Life is a process of constant conversion and change according to the circumstances. The first and third readings call us to a change of minds and conversion of hearts, while the second exhorts us to imbibe Christ’s spirit to become a slave. Reflecting upon conversion and change, on World Day of Migrants and Refugees, I/We can also ask: What is my/our thinking about, and response to, the migrant and refugee crises that are so overwhelming in today’s world?

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading must be understood in the light of the Jewish view of the corporate dimension of sin. In the early Israelite community’s self-awareness as God’s chosen people, the individual was not distinguishable from the community—since emphasis was on communal identity, unity and solidarity. Thus, the sins of parents were punishable in the third and fourth generation of their children. However, the destruction of Israel’s treasured possessions during the Exile—temple, monarchy, covenant, identity, etc.—brought in a new emphasis on the individual. Prophet Ezekiel, in particular, is known for bringing in this corrective so as to stress that both aspects—i.e., individual responsibility and corporate solidarity—must be held together in harmonious tension. Today’s passage highlights the doctrine of responsibility. An individual is responsible for her/his sins precisely because s/he is free. Thus, much as one is free to sin, so also is one free to turn away from sin and be converted to God. In Ezekiel’s words: “When the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life.” Thus, Ezekiel explains to his people that sin is death; and conversion is life: If one chooses to renounce all one’s previous sins, one shall certainly live, not die (v.28).
2. The Greek equivalent of ‘conversion’ is *metanoia*, meaning, ‘change of mind’ or a ‘turnaround’. Indeed, Biblical change really implies a ‘conversion of heart’. Today’s gospel passage, popularly known as the ‘parable of the two sons’, can also be seen as a ‘parable of two converts’ whose mind and manner of responding to a particular situation change. When asked to toil in the vineyard, the first son refuses with: “I will not!” But he later repents and *does* go to work. Conversely, the second son says, “Certainly!” but does not go. There’s a ‘conversion’ and turnaround in both cases: the first son repents and responds generously; the second dishonours his word and is condemned. Although the first son seemed disobedient ‘in word’, he repented in deed and ‘in work’. This can be seen as an ‘inner conversion’. By contrast, the second son paid lip-service to his father and seemed obedient; but his word did not bear fruit in actual work. He only ‘appeared’ to be converted towards doing his father’s will. Coming soon after Jesus’ conflict with the chief priests and elders who question his authority on the basis of their external, ‘professional’ authority (see Mt 21:23-27), Jesus strongly condemns their attitude, saying, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you!” (v.31).

3. The vineyard in the parable stands for Israel (see Isaiah chapter 5 about the ‘unfruitful vineyard’), whose leaders—most prominent among whom were the priests, pharisees and elders—were like the son who promised to work for his father but actually did not. Their holiness and righteousness were limited to a legalism and ritualism, at best, and mere lip-service, at worst. However, those who initially said “no” to serve in the vineyard—here, the tax-collectors and prostitutes—were those who “*repented*” and later began doing the will of the father: God. These latter become heirs of God’s kingdom rather than the former ‘holy ones’ whose pretensions, holier-than-thou attitudes and condemnatory stances towards those whom they considered ‘impure’ and ‘sinners’ got them nowhere. This reading can be a warning to men and women who consider themselves to be ‘religious’ by virtue of their vows and religious profession, and yet do not really *work* for God’s reign.

### **Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the Theme of Conversion and Compassion:**

If the first and third readings convey messages of conversion and change, the second reading from Paul’s ‘*kenotic* hymn’ in his letter to the Philippians provides a supreme model of conversion: Jesus Christ, whose conversion is from being ‘Lord’ (*kyrios*) to becoming ‘slave’ (*doulos*) and dying on the cross in a most hideous and humiliating way. Paul exhorts the Philippians: “Let the same *mind* be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (v.5). Here, Paul’s appeal for conversion and change can be understood at two levels: (a) to *imitate* Christ as a model [exterior] of self-emptying; or, (b) to *grow* or *increase* in Christ-likeness [interior] by virtue of the fact that we are part of his body through baptism: He as vine; and we, as branches. Today’s psalm (25) is a plea for mercy: “Remember your mercy, Lord!” begging God to remember us, here-and-now, just as God did formerly. In the Bible, when God remembers, God acts! Let us pray for God’s mercy and help in converting ourselves and in changing evil societal structures of our day.

### **Two Current Conversions in Our Context:**

*Conversion towards the Cause of Migrants and Refugees:* On ‘World Day of Migrants and Refugees’ Pope Francis has chosen the theme: ‘*Forced like Jesus Christ to flee*’ calling for pastoral help for internally displaced peoples (IDPs) who, though being in their own countries are rootless and roofless due to their religion, or ethnicity or minority status. Rather than being indifferent or paternalistic towards them, Pope Francis exhorts us to foster the principle: “*to involve in order to promote,*” meaning, there’s need to recognize their value, charisms and talents so as to fruitfully tap these to promote their cause of full recognition and reintegration into mainline society.

*Conversion from one’s mind → to heart → to spirit:* Let’s strive to be open to see reality ‘as it is’ (with one’s senses) → then, to love the good and reject the evil (with one’s heart) → finally, to experience oneness with God’s Spirit so as to feel united in spirit with every manner of being as an expression and extension of God’s love. Let me convert myself before converting others.

**In Lighter Vein:** An aged Rabbi who lived an exemplary life and converted many people to his ancestral religion was distraught when his son embraced Christianity. After his death, he appeared sulking and sad before the Almighty. “What’s the matter, Rabbi?” asked God, deeply concerned. “It’s my son,” cried the Rabbi, “He converted to Christianity!” God replied in a consoling voice, “Don’t worry, friend, I understand you perfectly—my only son did the same thing!”

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