

SAYING YES TO GOD: 26TH SUNDAY A

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It's one thing to talk the talk, but another to walk the walk. We've been listening to the story Jesus told us about a father who said to his two sons: *'Go and work in the vineyard today.'* The first answered: *'No! I won't.'* But later he changed his mind and went. That story reminds us that one of the wonderful things about being human is that we have free will. Having free will, we can change our minds and make a decision to say *'yes'* to God and begin new and better lives.

A man turned to drink. He began to live for his next drink. Drink became such an obsession and compulsion, that he also turned away from God and his family. One day while he was walking along and thinking of the mess he was making of his life, he saw a bent, rusty nail in the gutter. It reminded him of himself and his life. So he picked it up and took it home. He put the nail on an anvil, and began to straighten it out and clean it up. An hour later, it looked like new again.

Then the thought hit him that he could straighten out and clean up his life too. That thought triggered his conversion. He turned away from drink and back to God and his family. Today he keeps that nail, now straightened out, clean and bright, in his wallet. It reminds him to stay on the right path.

Both stories tell us that as long as we are alive, we can change, change for the better. Both stories tell us that actions speak louder than words, and louder than just good ideas and good intentions. Indeed there is much truth in the proverb: *'The way to hell [separation from God] is paved with good intentions.'* The second son in Jesus' story knows the right words: *'Certainly, sir,'* he says, but he does not keep his word. The first son, on the other hand, has second thoughts about his refusal, and shows his repentance by going to work in the vineyard straight away.

That story Jesus told us is a powerful illustration of the truth he taught in his famous Sermon on the Mount: *'It is not those who say to me, "Lord, Lord", who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven'* (Mt 7:21).

Next, Jesus blitzes his opponents, the religious leaders, by turning his parable on them. You've been mouthing all the right words about God's law, he tells them. You've been carrying out all the prescribed rituals. But you have not been doing what God wants and living in God's way. And when John the Baptizer called on you to repent, you took no notice of him. On the other hand, tax collectors and prostitutes, who used to say 'no' to God, have now been saying 'yes', and have meant what they say. They are living in God's way, as good, law-abiding and honest people, and now belong to God's kingdom. But you, he tells his opponents, are not there yet, and are not even close.

Jesus has a message for you and me as well. We are church-goers. We say the prescribed words every time we come together to pray. We carry out the right rituals as laid down in the book. Then we go back to the world from which we came. Now there are many good and beautiful and wholesome things about our world. But there are also many evil and corrupt things. It's a world where God has been pushed in the back, elbowed out of the way, and shoved across the boundary line. No one blows the whistle about it, and no one seems to face the tribunal for what they do to God and the interests of God. All too often, in fact, rough play and dirty tricks get applauded and rewarded out there.

Our world has been saying to God: We don't want you in our public schools. We don't want to call on your name when asked to tell the truth in our courts. We don't want you calling us to financial responsibility. We don't want any mention of you on any public occasion. And we simply refuse point blank to stop polluting the planet you gave us.

After all, our world protests in its defence, not everyone believes in God. And with God out of its way, and out of its consciousness and conscience, our world has decided that just about anything goes. In movies and on television there is so much profanity, violence, manipulation, seduction, casual and promiscuous sex. Pop music sometimes endorses grunge, drugs, rape, murder, suicide and witchcraft. Our world calls it entertainment. I call it a society that has lost its way and is going to the hell and misery of its superficiality, emptiness, meaninglessness, lovelessness and heartlessness.

Our world has well and truly lost its innocence. It is also putting you and me in serious danger of losing ours. And should we have already lost our innocence, our world makes it difficult for us to straighten out our lives and clean up our act. But all is not lost. From having said 'no' to God, perhaps many times, we

can start saying 'yes', and saying it not just many times, but saying it all the time.

Our greatest hope for achieving this remains the person of Jesus, Saviour of the world and our personal Saviour. Every time we come together for the Eucharist, he comes to us, and unites us to himself. Here at the Eucharist we remember all that he has taught us. Here we are inspired by his example. Here we are influenced and empowered by him. Here he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us along the path that leads to both goodness of life and the goodness of God.

In him we place our trust, then, not only to survive the presence of evil and corruption in an otherwise good and wholesome world, but even to thrive, to thrive as his followers. He is the medicine we need for our weakness. He is the food we need for our strength. He is our way, our truth, and our life. Thank God for that!

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