

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 27, 2020, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 21:28-32

“Grateful Obedience”

If you remember, a few weeks ago I spoke to you about Jesus and His Apostles at Caesarea Philippi. It is up in the north of Israel, and not far from the Lebanon border. How Peter responded to Jesus' question of who they say that He is. So much happened to those Apostles in just a few weeks, as three of them witnessed the Transfiguration, of Jesus and His holy glowing, along with Moses and Elijah. Then they headed to Jerusalem and experienced Palm Sunday, the Last Supper, and the arrest and execution of our Lord Jesus Christ. Their heads must have been absolutely spinning, especially when Jesus rose from the dead and visited them that same day in the upper room – and then forty days later witnessed Him ascend to the Father from the Mount of Olives, right across the Kidron Valley from the Holy City of Jerusalem. As if that were not enough – just a week after that, when it was fifty days after Passover, the Holy Spirit came to them, as a rushing wind, washing over them, on the Day of Pentecost and changed everything! They were new people, emboldened and filled with the confidence that what they were preaching about Jesus was not only true – but transforming the lives of those who heard the truth and believed. That transforming power has touched each one of us, as well.

Let me rewind just a bit to today's Holy Gospel reading from Matthew. Jesus is still alive and shares a parable about two sons who answer their father's request to go work in the vineyard. Each one answers differently – and then go and do the exact opposite of their response. Can you just imagine someone saying they will do something, and go and do the exact opposite? Have you ever witnessed that? I think sometimes some of us get to see some of that. This is not isolated to only children – we are all shining examples of saying one thing and sometimes doing another. I would venture to say that there is not one of us who has not done this at one time or another in our life. “Sure, sure I'll there” – and then then tada – empty seat!

If you found out about the greatest new little shop, or a new restaurant with great food, that does take out – you don't necessarily have to go and sit in these days of COVID, and they have got wonderful prices, or you heard about a movie that interested you that you could rent online – without having to go into a movie theatre - wouldn't you share that with your friends? I would say that the majority of the people here today or watching the service online are thinking to themselves – “yes, of course.” But wait - why is it so hard for people to tell others about the most incredible person in your life – Jesus of Nazareth, or about the church that they go to and how it has and continues to change your life? This is what I have difficulty understanding; I cannot help but wonder why we cannot do the same when it comes to sharing our faith! This is nothing new to us today - it was the same in Jesus' day. People have not changed all that much.

God presented His message of salvation to the Jewish leaders first through John the Baptist – and they rejected it, but the scorned sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes received that message with open arms and open hearts. The Jewish leaders' claim of serving God and being faithful to the Torah went along with them being the religious leadership for the people, but in

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fact these leaders were not obedient to God. They totally rejected the message of John the Baptist, just as they rejected the message of Jesus of Nazareth – enough to want Him killed. Why is it that the scorned sinners, with no claim to righteousness whatsoever, believed both John the Baptist and the message from Jesus? That is why Jesus said that they were entering the kingdom of God! These people knew that they were the ones who were desperately in need of grace. I am quite sure that they told their friends of the good news that they had received, and how it affected their lives.

For Jesus, doing the will of the Father is a matter of words and a matter of deeds too. It is one thing to say one does or WILL do the will of the Father; it is another thing actually to do it. Words alone mean absolutely nothing! My father used to have a term for that – “lip service” – that what comes out of your lips does not necessarily come through your hands. The Apostle James reminds us “*For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.*” (James 2:26) When you say yes – then go and do it! Remember I told you last week that it is not about earning your way to heaven through works – the work has ALREADY been done - once for all time, by Jesus on the cross, and we should be so gratefully obedient that we want to do for Him, out of gratitude, to share Him and His love with others, all for His glory, and not for ours. And so I come back to my earlier question - how is it then that we can share our favorite things, places, and stories, but we cannot get up and share Jesus with others?

I believe that God is more impressed by our performance than by our promises. There is that “lip service” again. To put it more plainly – God is not interested in our saying one thing and doing another, or our waiting till we get around to it. I am sure you know of someone – maybe even yourself, who when pressed to a difficult situation promises God everything they have and everything they are if He will only get them to a better place, and do the thing that they need the most – heal that friend or relative of theirs. And when He delivers them from their distress - they soon forget their promise, forget their vow, and get right back to business as usual!

Good intentions! You know what they say about them? The road to “Hades” is paved with them: New Year’s resolutions; I am going to get on the tread..., I am going to lose..., people volunteering to serve on committees and then forgetting all about them altogether; promising to read your Bible every day and not opening it even once; making commitments and not keeping them. Please do not misunderstand me, I am not pointing fingers. You know what happens when you point a finger? There are 3 more fingers pointing right back at you! I believe that Jesus wants us to make good on our intentions, on our promises, on our commitments, and we have to take a good look at our commitment; to examine who we really are.

We need to be fruitful and so we must have a faith that acts and brings forth fruit because as James said, “*faith without works is dead*” (James 2:26) We are called to be Jesus’ disciples and to act now through being obedient. The time to obey is right now! Let me put it to you this way: if you were to delay stopping at a stop sign, one of three things might happen. 1) You might get a ticket. 2) You could get in an accident, or 3) you could have a close call and you wind up just barely escaping an accident. The point is that we are fruitful when we are obedient not

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procrastinating and disobeying the Lord. Please, be as good as your promises and your commitments!

When we obey - we bear much fruit. When we are not obeying, we come across as someone blinded and then we end up leading others who are also blind astray. The religious leaders of Israel did not act on God's word through John the Baptist and Jesus and so the repentant sinners would be able to enter God's kingdom of heaven ahead of them, or instead of them. The difference between the religious leaders and the repentant sinners is just one thing --- the O word -- obedience. Jesus once said, "*He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.*" (Matthew 12:30) When we agree to obey and work in the vineyard --- which is God's kingdom here on earth, we are working and "gathering" with Jesus Christ and for Him! Here these words from Jesus Christ, as recorded in Matthew 5:37. He said, "*Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.:*"