Trinity 17 A, 27 September 2026

The Heart of the Father and the Relationship between His Children

Scriptures: Ezekiel 18:26-32; Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32

By the Reverend Ruth Li

Matthew 21 contains a unique parable that has no parallels. The Parable of the Two Sons (21:28–32) is between the stories questioning Jesus's authority (21:23–27) and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (21:33–46), which are next to each other in Mark 11.

Have you ever heard a friend ask you, saying, "Tell me, what shall I do with my child whom I love? I advise, model, and direct them to help them, but they do not listen." If a person meets you and asks you such a question, it means that person has really faced the all-too-common dilemma these days of having children who don't listen and obey.

Our readings this morning reflect this dilemma. Especially the Gospel reading from St. Matthew that we have listened to today, which depicts our loving Heavenly Father's feelings toward His disobedient children.

In the parable, the father approaches both sons with equal grace, calling them into the urgent work of his vineyard. One responds by saying yes and then no; the other by doing the other way around.

The first son represents the sinners, tax collectors, and outcasts who initially say "no" to God through a rebellious life, yet later repent and obey when confronted and challenged by grace and truth.

In the Eucharist, according to the General Confession which we have all said, it stresses "μετάνοια," repentance — a real turning of the mind and heart, a deep spiritual conversion, a turning away from your old ways, and redirecting your life toward a higher purpose. Words of religious assent mean nothing if grace does not produce a move to a changed life. Our reaction should therefore be repentance and obedience to the Lord's teaching.

We also know that this is a lifelong pursuit that requires regular reflection, assent, renewal, and confirmation at the Eucharist and in other places. As St Paul realised himself: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want, is what I do." (Romans 7:19). Therefore, we need to be constantly examining our consciences, so we do not fall into the trap of the second son.

Jesus makes his point clear: Good intentions are not enough. And promises don't count unless they are performed. How many times have you heard someone say they are going to do something and then not do it? It's one of the chief sins of our generation.

The second son represents those with good intentions but who lack the fortitude to follow through, and also another kind of person, like the religious establishment and chief priests of the day, who gave pious words ("I go, sir") but whose hearts remained distant and unfruitful, lacking true action or humility. The warning is also directed at those who assume their

inherited status or religious pedigree guarantees entitlement while missing the active movement of God's grace.

As the second son, the chief priests and elders had every opportunity to know the will of God and loudly professed it by following it, yet they rejected God's prophet instead of cooperating with Him. But the publicans and sinners, as the first son in the parable, open rebels against the laws of God, came and repented through God's grace, and entered work in His vineyard.

True obedience to God is shown by actions and repentance, not just empty words, nor by looking down on others while doing nothing themselves. Jesus contrasts rebellious sinners who later repent with religious leaders and others who say yes to God but refuse to obey.

Dear brothers and sisters, God calls each of us who are called by name to work in His vineyard, His Church. We come here to worship God as a part of answering His call. May the Holy Spirit open our hearts to see ourselves. Are we like the first son or the second one? Or the religious leaders? Or the sinners who repented and who believed in Jesus Christ as their Saviour, following the Lord Jesus' teaching and humbly proclaiming His Gospel to build up His Kingdom – His Church? The stories of the calling of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10) and Matthew (Matthew 9:9–13) resonate here.

God wants to change our hearts so we can have a good relationship with Him, respect His will, and do it. We can lose that treasure if we refuse the grace, the free gift of God's blessing and strength, that the Lord Jesus has won for us through his victory on the cross.

God calls us together to offer our gifts, talents, and skills to build up His Church, His Body, through the leadership that God has appointed. Do not build up your own things in the Church, nor show your own way, nor copy worldly ways and theories. Churches that do this are doomed to failure. He calls us into His vineyard to work for Him according to His requirements, His will, and His promises. Do you want to keep a good relationship with God? Do you seek to please God, respect His will and loving plan for your life, and allow the Holy Spirit to fill your heart with the peace, joy, and righteousness of God's kingdom (Romans 14:17)?

Would you like to answer God's call to work in His vineyard, His Church, to build up the Church through your willingness and respect?