

“Going To the Vineyard”

(Matthew 21.23-32)

Grant Bullen

Introduction

I was 49... and I was away on Retreat, soberly reviewing my life... feeling the struggle of it... not long into a new parish and already hitting the wall. I'd been a priest for 25 years... and I couldn't count the number of sermons I'd preached on the *importance of a daily discipline of prayer, reflection and silence*. I was good at talking about it... indeed I'd read books, and in my public life I was an expert. I talked about it so much in fact, I often fooled myself into thinking that I *did* actually have a daily spiritual practice. But in the silence of the Retreat... and in the failure that I felt... I knew that wasn't true. It was a smokescreen... more designed to fool myself than impress others... although I guess I wanted to do that too.

I heard the Spirit call so strongly... *'You've got to get serious in this Grant! You've got to do it!!'* I'd heard that call for decades... but I never went to that *vineyard*... I never went. But at age 49... in desperation... I made a resolution to go home and try again. Even as I made it, the cruel voices in my head erupted in mocking laughter. *'You've said that so many times and you never do. You're hopeless... and anyway it's too late... you never will now.'*

But they were wrong. *This time*... I did get up early the next morning... and the next... and I've never stopped. Something shifted inside me... and I did it... I'll never know what changed – it's a mystery. I just *did* it this time.

It's *my* conversion story¹... and life has flowed differently ever since. And those cruel inner voices *were* wrong... It wasn't too late. It's never too late to take faith seriously. In God's grace, we're allowed to change our mind.

¹ It's one of many really... but it's a BIG one for me.

The Parable of the Two Sons and the Vineyard

In today's parable... a father asks his two sons to work in the family vineyard. Such labour is their duty... they're obliged to obey their father unquestioningly. *Of course* they'll go. But shock... horror... the first son refuses. *'No, I don't want to work in that smelly vineyard of yours. I won't go!'* This is outrageous disobedience, and the listening crowd suck in their breath... This is clearly one very bad boy! But normal order is resumed when the second son agrees without hesitation. *'Of course I'll go father. I'm onto it right away.'* That's how a son is supposed to behave!

But... it's a Jesus-parable, so there's a twist... and it comes when the *'good obedient'* son... rolls over and goes back to sleep... and for all his fine words, never ever goes anywhere near the vineyard. Whereas the *'bad disobedient'* son... *changes his mind* – we never know why – and *does* go to the vineyard.

Jesus' question is simple... *'So which of these two actually **does** the will of his father?'* There's only one answer possible... It's got to be the one who originally said *No*... the one who at first appearance seemed the disobedient son. The one who changed his mind... and finally went.

This parable picks up additional sting from the context. The religious elite, the priests and elders, the ones who make a great public display of their obedience to God, are challenging Jesus' authority. It's against them that Jesus tells this parable. You can hear the crowd laugh with delight at the discomfort of their pretentious betters. And we at our safe distance of 2,000 years, can join in the pleasure. Clearly these religious stuffed-shirts are hypocrites who *talk* a good game of faithfulness... but their actions show the true disposition of their hearts.

But remember the rule for reading parables – if we walk away feeling comfortable, we haven't heard. So we ask the question of ourselves. *'When I look at my life – at what I **do** not what I **say** – which son am I?'* (Repeat)

The Danger of Religious Affiliation

The predicament of ostensibly 'religious people', which we see repeatedly throughout the gospels, warns us of the danger of uncritical religious affiliation... Yes, it *is* a particular problem for priests, who can so easily talk repetitively about a faith they don't actually practice. But it's not *just* priests. But being a church member... also... can easily mask the true state of the choice we're making in our hearts. The danger is we become comfortable in our outward observance, and this comfort shields us from the reality of our lives.

Now I think we *are* genuinely good people... and we wouldn't be here if there wasn't some part of our heart saying *Yes* to God's invitation. But if my own life is any guide, I think a lot of us say *Yes* to God... with a silent '*BUT*' that quickly follows. "*Yes I will open my heart to you God... BUT only so far.*" Using the metaphor of this parable... "*I'll sort of go in the general direction of your vineyard... I'll take a peek over the fence... I'll linger around the gate looking involved... BUT I won't actually go in... because that would be going too far.*"

And our 'qualified *Yes*'... *can* be more dangerous than an outright *No*. Religious people often fool *themselves* by looking busy in the general direction of the vineyard... We get busy around the church as a way of masking the choice of our heart... our heart that wants to say *Yes* to God, but is too afraid to commit. That's the danger... that we use our religious affiliation as a way of keeping God at a safe distance... as a way of ensuring we never ever take the risk of going *into* that vineyard.²

The Gift of Desperation

Jesus says to the stunned crowd, "*Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.*" (31b) He names these two classes of notorious sinners... people whose lifestyles make it apparently obvious that they're saying *No* to God...

² That's why honesty, even if it is a straight *No*, can be a more fertile place for conversion.

and yet who are actually entering God's realm of abundant life *before* the religious people. Can you hear the shock? The people who say *No...* are more likely to find their way to God's vineyard... than people who look like *us!!!!!!* How can that be?

Jesus taught... the *sinner*s are more likely to respond to God's invitation *because* they've got nothing to lose. Their desperation is their blessing... The 'desperate' say "*Why not? What have I got to lose? Life can't get any worse and it could get a whole lot better.*" While people like us are often stuck in that half-hearted '*Yes but...*' because we *are* afraid of losing what we already have.

The *sinner*s are at least honest about where they're at. Their *No* is more true and real. That's why being honest about how it *really* is, is a fertile place. Honesty can mark a new beginning in our lives.

Conclusion

Can you hear the wonderful grace in this parable? God's not fooled by 'religious celebrities' who make a lot of noise about their faithfulness... God's more interested in you and me... people who know what it's like to fail... who know what it's like to desire the 'vineyard of Life' and yet are too afraid to go in. As we sit here today, God is whispering to us, '*Come on...give my vineyard a try... you'll find your life there.*' As we sit here today, protected in our comfort... God is waiting for us to change our mind. To be like the first son... who for some reason changes his *No* into a *Yes...* and does something about it. It's never too late!

And if you're sitting there saying, '*I'll never change **my** mind*' ... Jesus is grinning at you and saying, '*That's what the tax collectors and prostitutes said!*' And if you're sitting there saying, '*None of this applies to me*'... (for whatever reason unique to you)... Jesus is looking at you with intent saying, '*That's what the priests and elders said.*'

There comes a time in our life when we just need to do it – stop pretending, stop covering our inaction with words, stop giving-in to our fear... and just do it. Do what we've always known we had to do... in order to truly live.