

THE TAX COLLECTORS AND THE PROSTITUTES GO INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD BEFORE YOU - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 21:28-32

“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

For the evangelist Matthew the people’s religious leaders are terminally ill with power for which there is no hope. God’s works and power becomes impotent in front of them. Why is this ? God can do everything with the sins and the sinners, his love can crumble sin, but can do nothing against those who act for convenience and this is what the high priests do, the leaders of the people. There was an antecedent, they are furious with Jesus, because after the episode in the temple when Jesus had declared the temple a den of thieves, these high priests and elders asked Jesus with what authority he can say this. And Jesus does not answer, but asks them with what authority did John the Baptist come and they do not reply, why? Reasoning between themselves; if we say from heaven, he will say to us: why did you not believe him? if we say men, we are afraid of the people who believe in a prophet, so they do not answer. All that the religious authority do, decide and act for their own convenience: for them at this moment it is convenient to not reply. But Jesus does not give up and begins with this parable that is directed to the leaders of the people, the high priests and the elders.

Jesus asks them “*What do you think?*” therefore forcing them to answer because they were silent, “*A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son,...’*” a word full of affection, “*..go and work in the vineyard today.*” The vineyard, as we know is the image of the Israeli population, therefore the father asks him to help him, that which the Lord asks, to collaborate with his creative works. “*And he answered, ‘I will not,’*” he answered abruptly and badly “*..but afterward he changed his mind..*” he felt remorse “*.. and went. And he went to the other son and said the same.*” So the same invitation to work in the vineyard “*And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’*” we must always watch out for those that say yes, sir “*..but did not go.*” Here there is a reference to the Prophet Isaiah, where the lord says: “*...this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips,..*” (Isaiah 29, 13) or the reproach of Jesus “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,*” (Matthew 7,21)

And here Jesus continues, turning to the high priest and the elders, the leaders of the people “*Which of the two did the will of his father?*” The evangelist illustrates again what is the will of the Father. What is the will of the Father? To collaborate with his creative actions and how does one collaborate with the creative actions of God? By communicating life to people. “*Which of the two did the will of his father?*” They said, “*The first.*” Jesus said to them, “*Truly, ...*” so Jesus’ reply is solemn and must be taken seriously, “*I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes...*” The evangelist has presented the first of the society, the people thought to be nearest to God, the high priests and elders, and now contrasts with the dregs of society, the tax collectors and the prostitutes. Precisely, the two categories that the Kingdom of God for them is difficult, as the priests and

Pharisees said, spirituality. So it is the fault of these two categories that the kingdom of God does not come. Well, Jesus says “*..the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.*” they take their places in the Kingdom of God. So Jesus contrasted in this passage, with the great, those nearest to God with the last, why? Because as we have said in the beginning, God can do nothing with convenience, egoism, greed and interest, it is this the true God of these high priest of power, all that they do is for self interest. God can do something for the sinners, with those that live in sin. His love can really convert them, so he succeeds with publicists and prostitutes, but not with religious leaders.

“*..John came to you in the way of righteousness,..*” faithful to God “*..and you did not believe him,..*” here is the answer they could not give, John's authority came from heaven or not? Now Jesus answers them “*..you did not believe..*” they had not believed. The religious leaders are always resistant to God's works, he sends messengers and prophets unsuccessfully, they are always resistant, they do not believe. It is a tragedy: for those who should teach the people the will of God, are the first not to know it and to not believe it

“*...and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.*” Those that you thought excluded from the kingdom of God have been accepted by Jesus. “*And even when you saw it,*” therefore they have no excuse you “*..did not afterward change your minds and believe him.*” The evangelist is very severe: the son in the parable repented, even Judah the traitor eventually repented, the authority no, they are completely resistant to God's works.