



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Disobedient boys

Readings: Ezekiel 18: 25-28, Ps 25, Philippians 2: 1-11, Matthew 21: 28-32

I was in my local butcher's recently - fantastic quality meat and the best self made pasties in Cornwall. The butcher's young son, in training, emerged from the back of the shop, his hand heavily bandaged. On enquiry, the young man was quite candid. His Dad had carefully and painstakingly instructed him in the safe use of a fierce cutting machine. He thought he knew better, did the opposite and, in consequence, was very lucky to still have all his fingers.

When the confessed and shriven apprentice had returned to the cutting room, the butcher, a delightful and highly intelligent man, looked at me. 'Why would you do that? Why would you ignore my instructions?', he enquired, still deeply puzzled by his son's near disastrous disobedience to his salutary advice. 'Because', I replied, 'you are his father'. It was a very Western joke.

Today's Gospel story may seem to us to have a simple answer – and, in one sense it does. But to an Eastern mind, it is not quite so simple. Yes, in the end, the first brother changed his mind and was obedient to the Father and did the job as commanded. But not before he had utterly humiliated his father by his blank refusal. He had disrespected his father and broken the

only commandment with a promise attached to it - 'Honour your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God gives you.'

Sure the other brother was worse – he lied and deceived and was unreliable AND disobedient – but the eventually obedient brother was not blameless. The response of both grown up children would have been as shocking to the Eastern ear as to our own ancestors. To us Westerners today the question Jesus sets is a no-brainer. Even in the thickest of classes a forest of hands would shoot up to answer the question. But we should not miss the dilemma Jesus posits in the question. The coherence of family life, the question of authority and the response of our own hearts and minds to the fatherhood of God.

Most of us are children or grandchildren of the 1960s rebellion, the overthrow of family and societal order – so accurately prophesied by Dylan in that hymn to anti-nomianism – lawlessness and societal disorder.

'Come mothers and fathers throughout the land and don't criticise what you can't understand. Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command. Your old road is rapidly ageing. Please get out a new one if you can't lend a hand for 'the TIMES they are a' Changing'.

Antinomianism rules – Lawlessness is normal and healthy. Individualism is king.

This seminal verse contains several of the 'supposed 'new truths' that have informed and deformed Western culture ever since. For a start :-

That it is a natural state of affairs for there to be rank discord between the generations – between adolescent and mature. Not true.

That older people don't understand what young people are going through. As if they had never been through the upheavals of growing up themselves. They don't even understand the emergent generation's language which is deliberately created to exclude.

In the words of another iconic 60s hymn, the Who's 'My Generation' – 'Why don't you all ffffffffade away. Don't try to dig what we all say.'

That to be critical of manifest nonsense or dangerously idiotic and destructive ideas and practices was uncaring and an infringement of freedom. Questioning of this this particular fraud has, in recent years, been legally re-designated as 'hate crime'. So much for the previously vaunted 'freedom'.

Our sons and our daughters are not beyond our command. A properly and lovingly applied authority in family life leads to a respectful exchange and due weight given to mature and well-intentioned reflection. Too often parents spend their time trying to be their children's 'best friend'. In so doing they not only pursue an unachievable goal but one that is highly undesirable. Friends are chosen and come and go over the years. Being a parent is a given and a job for life. To abdicate this God given responsibility is to leave our children as orphans of the cultural storm.

A friend may cheerfully go along with whatever harebrained scheme takes our immature fancy. A parent has the tiresome and often thankless task of saying 'NO' as often as it takes, because they love us and do not want us to

be endangered – not because they are mean or enemies of our self-fulfillment.

To return briefly to the lyrics – ‘your old road is rapidly ageing’ – The road in question is the long civilisational determinant of the Judeo-Christian understanding. Under siege from the so-called enlightenment – a reduction of all things to sterile materialism – battered by the Darwinian revolution – a surrender to the darkest perceptions of the supposedly mechanistic forces of the universe, the survival of the fittest – undermined from within by the dreary hopelessness of modernist theology, the short road to ecclesiastical atheism, the Church in the West has endured an existential crisis. In much of its manifestations the Church has sought to make sense of its position by collaboration and buddying-up to the new norms. Unfortunately but predictably this has proved utterly counter-productive. The haemorrhage goes on. The ‘NEW ROAD’ we were encouraged to ‘get out’, leads, at best, to nowhere, at worst to Hell itself. The upshot is a society, materially rich but spiritually bankrupt, shorn of identity, ignorant of purpose and robbed of hope. Insofar as, institutionally or personally, we have downplayed the benevolent and blessed commands of the Father in a futile attempt at compromise, we have colluded with the hostile creation of a fatherless society and, by default, applauded and encouraged the consequent mayhem.

We all sit here today because we are the sons and daughters who maybe said NO and then, on reflection, went and did what the Father asked. Woe betide us if we now become the sons and daughters that say YES every Sunday and then don’t do what the Father asks.

There is a lost world and a world of loss out there. It has, in the words of another Dylan ballad, ‘NO DIRECTION HOME’. We have the map of the old

road. God will not forgive us if, even at this late hour, we do not share it again with those who have wandered and share it anew with those who have never known the possibility of home and family and faith and the loving Fatherhood of God.