

The 26th Sunday of Year A: Actions speak louder than words - or do they? 1st Reading: Ezekiel 18:25-28: The consequences of immoral decisions; 2nd Reading: Philippians 2:1-11: Jesus' example of self-abasement; Gospel: Matthew 21:28-32: 'Saying' right is not the same as 'doing' it.

Just like the readings two weeks ago, this weekend's set have a 'Lenten' feel about them. The second reading, from St Paul's Letter to the Philippians (at least, the 2nd part of the full version) is used on Palm Sunday, to describe Jesus' giving up his divine status to become one of us; even worse, he was treated as a condemned criminal. The other two – especially the gospel – stress the moral sense of decision-making – that “actions speak louder than words”, in the old English phrase. Jesus' parable of the two sons gives a good example of it. Asked to do a job by the father, the first son truculently says 'no', but later on, goes and does it; the second lad smarmily says 'yes', but does nothing.

The first reading (to our 21st century ears) sounds harsh. It discusses the idea of an individual's responsibility for his or her own actions. (As with most countries up till the mid-19th century, Israel's standard punishment for even minor crimes was execution or flogging.) The context of Ezekiel Chapter 18 is that God does not want a family or community punished for the crimes of one person within it. Readers may recall the infamous policy of the Germans in the last war: they wiped out an entire village in Czechoslovakia after the local Nazi leader had been assassinated; later, they did the same in France, when partisans attacked an SS convoy going north to help the defences after D-Day. Russians did similar acts in eastern Germany as they advanced towards Berlin in 1945. (Even the British were known to send out 'punishment sorties' to do such things in the days of Empire.) Ezekiel teaches that this is wrong: we should not punish an entire group for the offences of an unknown member of it. That said, we must assume that adults are responsible for their actions - though this is not always accepted by some modern 'liberal' thinkers. However, if no-one was ever held responsible for what they did, how could any society function at all?

I briefly mentioned the gospel earlier. (Please do read it!) While the first son did do the job asked by the father - and second son, despite his sweet talk, did not - the atmosphere he created was still unpleasant. Yes, his “actions did speak louder than his words”, but I fear he would not have been an easy person with whom to get on. Sometimes people do a lot of work, including many good things for others, but their attitude spoils the effect of their good deeds, because the way they communicate to others gives the impression that they are doing these things unwillingly, or as part of a 'workaholic' personality that has to be busy all the time, to avoid any relaxation or serious thought.

I suggest that, in most of our adult situations, we need a mixture of actions and words – we and others need to understand what we are doing, and why. If we do not communicate any understanding or feeling, then our conduct can appear like that of a well-trained dog, with little serious thought or reason.

Another example of the reasons behind actions is also in this gospel: how and why the different Jewish leading groups maltreated St John the Baptist. The ordinary Jews saw John as a charismatic leader, sent by God, so they accepted his message as really inspired. However, their leaders saw John as mad – and dangerous too. They despised the common people as a crude, uneducated mob, so when well-known public sinners were converted - turning away from sin after hearing John preach - they remained unconvinced. Even though John could reach people's consciences, no credit was given by the priests and elders.

This brings us to the second reading. St Paul uses unashamedly emotional language to express how we should behave and communicate with each other. *“There must be no competition among you, no conceit....be self-effacing....so that nobody thinks of his own interests first, but of other people's instead..”* I know that this is a tall order for many of us, but at least we need to try! Like the first son in the gospel parable, much depends on the way we communicate: do we come over as difficult people? Do we appear to be acting out of a sense of compulsion, or showing-off, or obsession with work? Here, words do matter: they convey to others how we feel about them and about what we do for them.

In the 2nd half of the reading, Paul gives his reason for this: Jesus' own example. As a divine being from all eternity, *“he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave; he was humbler yet, even to accepting death on a cross.”* Afterwards, God raised him to glory. As a form of communicating loving service, this cannot be bettered.

So, what about us? I think we need both caution & humility: caution, in that it is easy to criticize people without knowing what lies behind their visible actions – especially when those actions infuriate or even just annoy us. At the same time, we need humility: checking what signals we send to other people, by our body-language and speech. Careless words (which we often don't really mean) can cost a lot of good-will and send the wrong message – like the off-hand initial refusal by the first son in the gospel parable. *Fr Jim Dunne.*