

As straightforward at first glance as the passage I just read from the Gospel of Matthew seems, it is far from clear how we might relate what it is saying to ourselves and to the present.

As he was writing his Gospel, Matthew's predominantly Jewish Christian community was experiencing growing tensions between it and the local synagogue in which many Jewish Christians continued to be involved. The parting of the ways between the church and the synagogue was at hand. The saying, as applied to that context, is affirmative of those Jews who have come to faith in Christ and negative about those who have not.

Our situation today as individuals and as a church community is totally different from the one that Matthew was addressing. Since the Second World War and the Holocaust and especially since Vatican II, the church has been trying to overcome a history of anti-Semitic prejudice and practices and to develop a new and more positive and collaborative relationship with the Jewish people.

The first part of the reading focuses on two sons and on their differing responses to a request on the part of their father. One responds positively but does nothing, while the other, after refusing to act, ends up doing what the father wanted him to do.

One way in which we might begin to relate what Jesus is saying to ourselves is to think of the disparity that often crops up between what we say and what we do. Sometimes that discrepancy is relatively unimportant but at others times it can have serious implications. We might, for example, promise a friend or a co-worker something that is of real significance for them and then, for the flimsiest of reasons, not do it. We all know of relationships that have suffered severe strain or in some cases have ended when a person's actions seem to give the lie to his or her protestations of friendship.

The contrast between what we say and what we do, especially when it repeats itself again and again, can become a form of hypocrisy. We present ourselves as a certain kind of person when our actions suggest that we are in fact very different. It is a failing into which many of us fall to some degree when it comes to our identity as Christians.

Most simply put a Christian is someone who follows or attempts to follow the teaching and example of Jesus. That following has a deeply spiritual dimension, involving faith in God and in what he has done for us in Jesus, and trust in God's promises. Such faith and trust have implications for the way we live.

In today's second reading, Paul encourages the Christians in Philippi to live the kind of life to which individually and as a community they have been called. "Be of the same mind," he says, "having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Our situation as a community of faith is obviously different from that of the people to whom Paul is writing. They were a relatively small group the members of which, while coming from different socio-economic backgrounds, would at least have known each other's names and been aware of their various situations. The kind of attitude of which Paul is speaking begins for us with our families and then with other small groups in which we might be involved.

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit," Paul says, "but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." The ideal implicit in what Paul is saying goes against the grain of our culture. We tend to put an emphasis on getting ahead, on thinking about number 1. We are encouraged to be competitive and to think of our relationships as a zero sum game. If someone is successful in something, it somehow takes away from us.

"Let each of you," Paul adds, "look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others." The vision of human life that Paul offers here is not something we can simply will or all at once begin to live. It presupposes a quality of heart.

The imitation of Jesus that is so central to Christianity is not something that can be achieved simply on the level of external actions. It demands an inner transformation.

Christianity has always been to some extent and is today a countercultural movement. That is true not only in regard to major issues like abortion and assisted suicide, but also and perhaps especially in regard to our ordinary, everyday attitudes and values, our hopes and desires, our relationship with one another.

In John's account of the last upper, Jesus declares: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." On another occasion, he said: "I have come not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for the many." In our reading from Philippians, Paul declares: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

What Paul here and Jesus in so many of his sayings offer us is an ideal. It is offered as a beacon for our life's journey. Although it is something that is more than we are and more than we will ever be, it can inspire us to continue to grow spiritually and to keep moving towards our ultimate goal which is life fulfilled and transformed in God.