

## ACTIONS NOT JUST WORDS (Mt 21:28-32)

A first grader goes to school on the first day of classes with a note from his mother that reads: “The opinions expressed by this child are not necessarily those of the parent.” Sometimes I think I should go around with a sign hanging from my neck that says: “The actions of this Christian are not necessarily those of Jesus Christ.” **Actions speak louder than words.**

Let's set the scene for today's gospel. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem for the final time for the Passover celebration, and all of the people have cheered and shouted “Hosanna” and proclaimed him as coming from God --- all the people, that is, except for the top brass of the Jewish people, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders, those with everything to lose in terms of status and power and prestige. Then Jesus goes into the temple area. Maybe he wants to pray in the temple, but he encounters all of these people doing business in the outer courtyard. In his outrage over the desecration of his Father's house, he overturns the tables of the money changers and drives away those who are buying and selling animals for sacrifice. Understand that when Jesus does this, he is undercutting a major part of the economy of Jerusalem, some estimate that it was half of the revenue of the city. This was “big business” that he attacked, the “power structure,” and the very source of income for the chief priests and the rest of the hierarchy. So the management team confronts Jesus and asks him by what authority does he do the things he does, wanting to hear him say if he is the Messiah or not, to trap him. But Jesus throws it right back at them and asks by what authority did John baptize for the forgiveness of sins. Up to the time of John, the only way to obtain forgiveness for their sins was through a lengthy process of sacrifice, a process in which they had to buy animals for the ritual. Again, it was feeding the economy. But John came along and said that forgiveness from God is free, as available to them as Jordan river water. The authorities know that their position and status is almost completely on the backs of the masses of people who flocked to John. They also feared that an uprising by the people against them would bring the wrath of the Roman occupiers upon them, and they did not want to upset the status quo. So they don't answer Jesus. And neither does Jesus answer their question. And then Jesus poses today's quiz to the chief priests and the elders. Who is the one who does the will of God? Is it the one who says “No, I won't,” (i.e., the sinner) but later recants and repents? Or is it the one who says I will but by his actions does not (i.e., the self-righteous)? Jesus did not put this little quiz to them to see how smart they were; he was making a crucial point about their relationship with God. Of course, they answer correctly because it is so obvious, but in doing so they con-

damn themselves --- and they know it. Then Jesus adds that the very people they despise and look down upon are going to heaven before them. How galling that this nobody, this carpenter's son from the backwaters of Nazareth, would dare to talk to them in this way! And Jesus signs his death warrant by his words and actions.

It is not what you say, not what you promise, not what you teach that matters most. If words alone could save the world, this earth would be a paradise. Too much of Christianity is extolled by pious phrases rather than by conduct, by words rather than by action, by discussion rather than by deeds. Even if our choice of words is exquisite, the Word of God will take root in our hearts not through what we say about it but by the way we express it in our lives. **Actions speak louder than words.**

Those of us with children know that better than most. As a parent, we constantly lecture them about what they are to do, the choices they are to make in their lives. But if what we do in our lives does not mirror what we say, our children see us as hypocrites and end up doing what they please. They become confused by the double standard by which we live our lives. So they reason, "If mom and dad don't have to do what they say, why should I?" No matter how loud we say it, no matter how hard we try to enforce it, we waste our breath by not living out what we preach. **Actions speak louder than words.**

In a novel by Albert Camus entitled The Fall, there is a devastating scene in which a respected lawyer, walking in the streets of Amsterdam, hears a cry for help in the night. He realizes a woman has fallen or been pushed into the canal and is crying for help. Then the thoughts come rushing through his mind: Of course, I must help, but a respected lawyer getting involved in this way? What would the implications be? And what about the personal danger? After all, who knows what has been going on over there. By the time he has thought it through, it is too late. He moves on, making all kinds of excuses to justify his failure to act. But, Camus, in one devastating line, says, "He did not answer the cry for help. That is the man he was."

That is precisely what can happen to us. We come here with good intentions. We resolve to be Christ's disciples as never before. Then we go back and we hear the cries for help but we just move on, making excuses all the way. And we stand under the judgment of that devastating line: We did not answer the cry for help. That is just the person we were. We talk about Christian love, and we mean to love, but, oh, how we fail! But that is not who we truly are. We are compassionate givers, created in the image and likeness of God. Compassionate giving touches our soul, gives us life. **Actions speak louder than words.**

We stumble, we fall, we fail, but God is always there, ready to pick us up --- if only we will repent. Repentance takes us beyond good intention. Repentance is the process of actually becoming the person God wants us to be. The forgiveness, the healing, the mercy is here and will change everything for us when we open ourselves up to receive the grace of a loving God. It is up to each one of us and to all of us collectively as part of the Body of Christ to respond to the cries for help which are ringing in our ears. **Actions speak louder than words.**

Last Sunday we heard the cry for help from Fr. Osborne, appealing on behalf of missionaries around the world who are spreading the message of God's love and mercy in corners of the world which we cannot individually touch. I was especially moved by his story of that village in the Philippines that lives in peace, where even the Christians and Muslims who fight each other put down their weapons as they enter the village and come together to play soccer.

Maybe the cry for help is coming from within our own family, from a spouse who suffers from addiction of one kind or another, to drugs or alcohol or pornography. Or maybe it is from one of our kids who is struggling with their relationships at school or with a pregnancy conceived from casual sex. Perhaps the needed response runs counter to our natural inclination but is the hand out needed to rescue them from their life-threatening situation.

Maybe the cry for help is from a neighbor or a coworker, or maybe even from a stranger, who has run into difficult times in this tough economic environment. Maybe they have been laid off or lost their home to foreclosure or been diagnosed with cancer or suffered a death in the family. Or maybe one of the spouses is suffering from abuse.

"Whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do unto me." Jesus Christ tells us. Jesus doesn't talk about words or good intentions but about actions and deeds. As professed disciples of his, we will be known by our responses to the cries for help coming from the vineyard of the Lord. **Actions .....**

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