

THE UPPER ALDE BENEFICE

The Twenty-sixth Sunday of the Year

It was Christina Rossetti who wrote 'Promises like pie-crust'.

*Promise me no promises
So will I not promise you:
Keep we both our liberties,
Never false and never true:
Let us hold the die uncast,
Free to come as free to go:
For I cannot know your past,
And of mine what can you know?*

It was certainly a radical thought from the Victorian era, the idea of two lovers that don't hold promises to one another, and whose relationship is free from commitments.

It certainly came back to me when I read this week's Gospel, the Parable of the Two Sons.

'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of 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 after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.'

Prostitutes and tax collectors were the most despised outcasts in Judaism. For many years God's relationship with Israel was thought of as a 'marriage' and Israel's disloyalty at various times in its history as 'harlotry'. It was understandable, therefore, why prostitution was considered to be a very serious sin. Tax collectors were the very personification of corruption and theft. According to the Roman system tax collectors (or 'publicans' in some versions of the Bible, but to be confused with 'innkeepers') would pay the state a fixed sum based on the theoretical amount of taxes due from a particular region. The tax collector had the right to collect the taxes from that region - and they were not above using questionable methods to extract those taxes. They would collect more than their due, thus lining their pockets, and they were shunned as collaborators with Israel's Roman captors.

Consider the consternation, therefore, when our Lord declared that those guilty of the most abhorrent of sins would enter God's Kingdom before those who considered themselves righteous and respectable.

Promises can never take the place of performance; words can never be a substitute for deeds. Christ demands that we who would be his followers give voice to our faith not just in the prayers and rituals we utter but in the positions, causes and candidates we support, the deals we make and the relationships we form with one another. The challenge of discipleship is to translate the many 'good intentions' we have into the actual work of being Christ's followers.

A lighter thought in these serious times.

I met a gorgeous girl in the bar last night and she promised to show me a good time. So we went outside and she ran 100 metres in 9.69 seconds.

