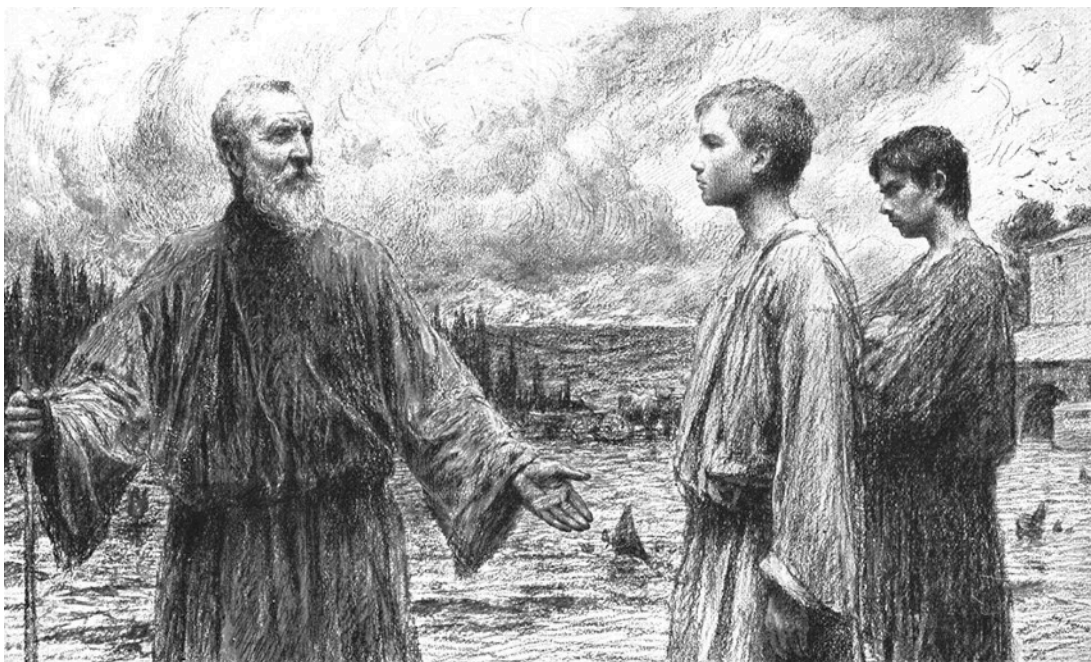

Ready to Answer

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 1 October 2023

Exodus 17:1-7 • Philippians 2:1-13 • Matthew 21:23-32



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

God must spend a lot of time waiting. Our concept of time means little to God, to whom “a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day,” as the Scripture says (2 Peter 3:8). But whether they are days or millennia, our God is always waiting for us. For every Christian in this world, there are 2 non-Christians, and that’s just the estimate of the ones who self-identify as Christians — 2.4 billion of us. I expect that the number of people who truly worship and pray regularly is far lower. I say this not to depress you with statistics — which is so easy to do, and which so many of our church brethren seem to spend a lot of time doing — but to point out how many people there are for whom God is waiting.

For God wants all of us. God is not seeking one in three of us to come to faith; God won’t be satisfied with 50 or 60% of us, however many billions that would be; God wants all of us. We are all God’s creation, and God loves every one of us. But God won’t force us into faith. God will invite us. God might set up circumstances

that lead us into belief; but we have to follow the path ourselves. So God spends a lot of time waiting.

Imagine a mother waiting for a beloved daughter or son to call, one she hasn't heard from for many months. Perhaps that child is unreachable, and all she can do is wait. Imagine her anguish. One can only go so far in ascribing human emotions to God, for God is beyond anything we can conceive; and yet we know that we are made in God's image. So perhaps we can say that God feels anguish knowing that so many of us — the vast majority of the people God created — have not and perhaps will not turn to faith, in spite of all the gifts, all the beauty, all the wonder of the world created just for us. But God continues to wait. From time to time God calls one or more of us, and then waits for us to answer.

This is the way I feel about my own experience of coming to faith. I feel that God was calling me all my life — maybe I'm wrong, I don't know — but I feel that it was so; and it took me until about 45 years into my life before I became aware of it and tentatively started to answer. The call seemed to come from inside the Cathedral in the Square, pre-earthquake, of course; and maybe it was in the glorious voices of the Cathedral Choir, since the very first service I attended there was Evensong, or maybe it was in the friendly voices of the Dean and members of the congregation. What made me listen at that time, when I hadn't before? What made me perceive God's call, when I hadn't before? Or, if I'm wrong about the first 45 years, and God really wasn't calling all that time, why wasn't God calling all that time?

These are questions that have no answers — at least, not yet. Maybe, as they say, “all will be revealed in time.” I look forward to it.

But because of this, I really relate to today's Gospel reading about the two sons. Their father asks each of them to go work in the vineyard. One says, “No, I won't,” but later goes anyway; the other says, “Yes, sir, I will,” but then he doesn't. Jesus asks the Pharisees which son did the father's will. It seems like a trick question; but it isn't, really. The son who first refuses but then goes to work is actually doing the father's will, and the other isn't. Jesus didn't ask the question in order to trap the Pharisees into a wrong answer; it was to show them their own fault in not trusting in God. It was to show them how deaf they were to God's call, for surely, had they been listening, God would have revealed to them the truth of the Gospel. God wanted all the Pharisees to come to him, just like everyone else.

Although — think about this for a moment. There is a strong thread which winds through the Gospel about how all the events were pre-ordained, all part of God's plan. One example is Judas Iscariot and what he did in betraying Jesus. During the Last Supper, as Matthew tells it, Jesus identifies Judas as the traitor:

Jesus answered, ‘The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by

whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.’
(Matt 26:23-24)

Had Judas proven not to be a traitor, would Jesus’s arrest, trial and execution have happened anyway? I believe so. God’s will will be done, one way or another; and God’s plans cannot depend on the actions of one man, unless that one man is Jesus. So with the Pharisees. Their unbelief was one of the drivers of the hostility which met Jesus at every turn and eventually resulted in his execution. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, each Pharisee as an individual could have responded to God’s call and believed, and a few of them did.

As Jesus reminds them, John the Baptist came to tell everyone who would listen about the coming of the Messiah. The Pharisees didn’t listen, but the prostitutes and tax-collectors did. They were considered to be the lowest-ranked members of society, but they listened, and opened their hearts to John’s message and then to the teachings of Christ. Jesus came to earth as a man in order to spread the Gospel, but the Pharisees closed their ears. They might have been like the first son and deny Jesus at first, but then come to believe; but they did not. They were still denying him. Who are the Pharisees of today? Who will not open their hearts to God’s call?

It should be noted, as I read somewhere, that neither son is really a good example to be followed. One said no and went anyway, the other said yes and didn’t go. Best of all would be to say yes and then go and do it. This would be the response of the honest person, the person of their word. As James says, “Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation (James 5:12). This takes strength of character, and in the case of following Jesus, some fortitude. But we should all pray that when God calls us, we are ready to respond.