

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF PROSTITUTES AND TAX COLLECTORS

September 26, 2005

**Leader:** In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (Invite persons present to pause for a few moments of silent recollection and to offer any special intentions.)

In this Sunday's gospel, Jesus is very blunt with the chief priests and the elders, and yet, speaks highly of prostitutes and tax collectors: a rather puzzling position to take. Let's listen to God's Word again.

**Reader:** When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and challenged his authority. So Jesus asked them this question. "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 am going, 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."

**Leader:** This wasn't the only time that the Jewish authorities questioned Jesus about his authority for what he said and did. Based on the way Jesus responds, we get the impression that Jesus was used to this kind of confrontational approach from these people, and that he had come up with a strategy that dealt with their antagonism quite effectively. Through the use of a common human situation – the response children give to their parents when asked to do an unpleasant chore – Jesus cleverly reverses the situation so that these religious leaders of his day are condemning their own hypocrisy.

Imagine how steamed these chief priest and elders would have been when they heard that the people they considered sinners and scum – tax collectors and prostitutes – would enter the Kingdom of God ahead of them. This would have shattered their nice, neat and self-righteous little world.

How does this reading relate to us? We all want to be counted as members of the Kingdom of God, so what can we learn from these prostitutes and tax collectors? The only thing we are told by Jesus is that these sinners believed John the Baptist when he came in the way of righteousness while the chief priests and elders did not. We know that John had one message: "Repent" His was a call to conversion: to recognize and admit we are sinners in need of God's mercy, and to turn from our selfish ways to walk God's way.

**All:** Lord Jesus, help us to heed the lesson of your words of life this week. Help us turn away from self-righteousness and the exclusion it brings. We pray that you grace us with the humility to embrace repentance and conversion, for this is the only authentic response to your free gift of salvation. Amen.