26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Homily: Fr. Shijo George
Pastor – Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Victoria, BC, Canada

We live in a world of offers and promises. Everywhere we go, we see advertisements screaming: "Special offer! Limited-time offer! Buy one, get one free! Satisfaction guaranteed!" Some offers are genuine, and sometimes we discover that an offer is not quite what it appeared to be. Sometimes it proves to be a scam. Imagine ordering the latest and most expensive iPhone. Opening the package with great excitement, we find instead a piece of wood or a brick inside the iPhone cover! Jokingly, some people might say: "Well, at least I got something rectangular!" The problem is not the package, the problem is the false promises; the scams.

Unfortunately, empty promises are not limited to advertisements. We experience them daily in friendships, families, society, and sometimes even in our relationship with God. We say: "I will do it. I will change. I will come. I will pray. I will forgive." and somehow today becomes tomorrow, tomorrow becomes next week, next week becomes next month, and eventually the promise disappears.

Today, Jesus gives us the parable of two sons. The father says to the first: "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." The son replies: "I will not." but later he changes his mind and goes. The second son says very politely: "Yes, sir, I will go." but he never goes. Then Jesus asks: "Which of the two did the will of his father?" The answer is obvious: the first son. Here, Jesus is telling us something very important: God is not impressed merely by what we say; God looks at what we actually do. We can say all the right things and still live the wrong way. We can say: "Lord, I love you." but refuse to forgive. We can say: "Lord, I trust you." but live in fear and despair. We can say: "Lord, I will change." but continue exactly as before.

This is not a new problem. In Exodus, when they experienced the love and care of God, Israel says: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." It sounds like a beautiful promise.

But Isaiah later says: “This people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.” Their lips said yes, but their lives said no.

That is exactly what Jesus sees in the religious leaders of his time. They had heard John the Baptist; they saw his goodness; they heard his call to repentance; but they did not change. Meanwhile, the tax collectors and sinners heard the same message, believed, repented, and they changed their lives. Jesus was not condoning their sins; He is saying that a sinner who genuinely changes is closer to God than a respectable person who only pretends to say yes.

Blessed Fulton Sheen made this distinction beautifully. The first son represents the sinner whose faults are visible. His sins are like mud on a white garment: everyone can see them. Because they are visible, he may have recognized the need for him to change. The second son represents what Sheen called the more hidden danger: the respectable sinner. He looks good, speaks well, says all the right things, but there is no conversion of heart.

Sometimes we are that second son. We may make promises: “Lord, absolutely, I will forgive!” yet keep a grudge for ten years. “Lord, I will read Bible!”, and somehow our Bible remains beautifully closed and dust-free! “Lord, I will help that person!”, and suddenly we become extremely busy! Sometimes that word ‘busy’ is used whenever we are reluctant to help others. We say: “We would like to help, but …” ending up as a polite refusal. It sounds like a ‘yes’, but is actually a ‘no’.

Shakespeare has a similar insight in Macbeth: “To beguile the time, look like the time.” The dialogue is between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth regarding killing the King, advising Macbeth to hide his true, evil plans by acting friendly, welcoming, and normal on the outside; famously adding: “Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it.” There is a difference between looking like something and actually being something. Jesus challenges us today: Are we genuinely Christian, or do we simply look Christian? Genuineness is the heart of today's Gospel. God wants us to be genuine with God, with

ourselves, and with one another. We may be able to fool others, and sometimes even fool ourselves; but we cannot fool God.

There is great hope in the first son. He said 'no' initially, but he changed. His first response did not determine his final response. That is good news for all of us. Perhaps we may have said 'no' to God many times; perhaps we may have failed; perhaps we may have made promises and broken them: But we can still change. We can still get up, and we can still enter the vineyard.

So perhaps today we should ask ourselves: Do my words match my actions? Does my prayer match my life? Does my faith actually change the way I treat people? Christianity is not an advertisement; it is not an offer. It is not simply about saying the right words. It is about becoming the person we claim to be, as St. Paul encouraged: to be another Christ.

Let us pray, then: "Lord, make my yes a real yes. Make my words become actions. Make my faith become a life. And whenever I said 'no' to you, give me the humility and courage to change my mind and come back to your vineyard. God does not need more empty promises from us: He wants genuine hearts, willing hands and less promises. Less appearances. More truth. More genuineness. More action. More love.