

Today's gospel is about that particular form of hypocrisy that we can call *dishonesty of heart*. The heart itself is not dishonest and is not capable of being so; it is the lips which are dishonest if they do not speak the heart's feelings and intentions. You could almost say that this is *dishonouring* the heart. It really doesn't matter what those intentions are at any given moment – but to say they are otherwise is dishonouring the heart, is dishonesty of heart, is a lie. It is the most insidious kind of hypocrisy because we don't just tell the lie to ourselves, we tell it to others.

If the son who said 'No, I won't go to the vineyard' had *not* changed his mind and actually *hadn't* gone, he would have had more honesty and integrity than the son who said 'Yes, I'll go' but didn't. This is because he would have been true to the intentions of his heart, even though what was in his heart was a sadness to his father.

The heart cannot lie because what it contains is what it contains, for good or for bad; it is only when these contents are expressed – either to ourselves or others – that dishonesty and hypocrisy *can* enter. We can tell ourselves – and others – a million times over that we have forgiven this person who cheated us, or that person who was unkind to us – but the heart will know whether we are speaking the truth or not. Some things in our hearts shouldn't be expressed at all. Some things should; but whether we express them in word or deed – or not – we dishonour our heart if we lie about them. If we feel hard and unforgiving, or resentful and

jealous, angry or judgemental, then we must acknowledge the fact of such feelings to ourselves and not present to others a heart that is seemingly compassionate, tolerant, well-intentioned and forgiving. Disguising the contents of our heart – which W.B. Yeats called ‘a rag-and-bone shop’ – gradually coarsens and hardens it. It’s not a particularly slow process, mind: progressing from: “I’ll call you back this afternoon” to “Yes, I’ll go and work in the vineyard” when in both cases we know it’s not going to happen, isn’t exactly the work of a lifetime.

The whole meaning and purpose of this parable is to be found in the fact that Jesus is addressing it to the scribes and Pharisees and the religious status quo; he is, implicitly, indicting them for dishonouring their hearts, for deceiving others with their displays of public piety and adherence to the law. We must remember what a huge shock it must have been for these professional religionists to be told that the common prostitutes and tax-collectors (a particularly loathed breed) were making their way into the kingdom before them. In our time, it would be like telling the Archbishop of Westminster that the whores around Euston Station are closer to God than he and his bishops are. The word ‘shock’ is inadequate: they would have been incandescent with anger and outrage – small wonder they ended up crucifying him. It was their hypocrisy that so grieved the Lord, their presumption that they were superior to everyone else. In John 9:34, they say to the man born blind whom Jesus

healed: “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” In Chapter 23 of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of not practising what they preach, of tying heavy loads on people’s backs, of being whitened sepulchres, of being like serpents, a brood of vipers. This is all dramatic, furious, powerful stuff. It shows just how angry the Lord could get about hypocrisy: here is no case of ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’. That’s a Victorian illusion created to keep children quiet and cooperative. Better than laudanum, at least.

The real nastiness about hypocrisy is that it denigrates and disempowers those who have no means of defending themselves: in Jesus’ day this was the poor, the morally weak, the chronically sick or afflicted (remember, illness or poverty were considered to be the result of sin) – the prostitute and the tax-collector, in fact. They could not hide what they were and had no chance, even if they wanted to, of dishonouring their hearts. Jesus infinitely preferred their company. It always astonishes me that, having been silent or ambiguous so many times about his identity, Jesus reveals himself most fully and unmistakably to the woman of Samaria, who as a Samaritan was not only despised by orthodox Jews, but had also worked her way through five husbands and was currently living with another man. Fascinatingly (to me, at least!) the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches have canonised this woman and have given her the name ‘Photine’. I like that! She even has her

own feast day. This, of course, is a theological comment on the character of Jesus, rather than the woman. It also shows in a very vividly personal way the preference Jesus clearly had for God's *anawim* – an Aramaic word meaning those who have no voice of their own: the outcasts of society, including the prostitutes and tax-collectors. A difficult but interesting question that any of us can ask ourselves is: Who are today's *anawim*? Perhaps we pass them often and perhaps they do not impinge on our everyday consciousness. An even more difficult question would be: Who are today's scribes and Pharisees? If I am not to dishonour my own heart, I must say: sometimes it is myself.

Nothing in nature ever pretends to be anything other than what it is; the natural world is incapable of hypocrisy; every organic being, from a blade of grass to a galaxy, is exactly what it is. Only the human person is capable of dissimulation. Yet Jesus' parable, at once so apparently simple yet so profoundly insightful, offers us the ground rules that we need.

Let us not deceive ourselves or others about the contents of our heart; if we speak of them, we must do so truthfully or keep silent and say nothing at all. Our hearts cannot lie but our lips can. To lie is to dishonour the heart, to pretend to be other than what we are – and this is hypocrisy. This was the offence of the second son. Jesus said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit"; if, then, we belong to the spiritual *anawim* – if we have failings that we seem simply unable to

resist or overcome, if we have feelings in our hearts that are unworthy, if we find it hard to forgive, if we are fearful or lack trust in God, if we are full of doubts and anxieties, if we find ourselves jealous of what others have – and yet we do not pretend to be anything other than what we are, we may reasonably rejoice and be glad! For the Lord himself will prefer our company to the self-righteous. He will draw near us and reveal himself to us – as surely as he did to the woman of Samaria – for our healing and our consolation.