

What is the connection between today's Epistle reading of Paul's famous statement of Jesus and the Gospel reading of Jesus' parable of two brothers?

The Epistle reading as well as the Gospel reading for today is basically an answer to the question: 'Who is the rightful Lord?'

A person who has faith does not require the assistance of a miracle to confirm his knowledge of the Lord. This is how Paul understands Jesus is truly the exalted Lord. Philippians 2.5-11 is one of the noblest statements of Jesus' personal accomplishment, retelling several of the great biblical stories in order to declare him the Lord. Like the Israelites living in Egypt as slaves, Jesus came to the world taking the form as a slave; but unlike the Israelites, He was never disobedient, in fact he was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. As a human creature Jesus succeeds where Adam failed. Adam wanted to be equal with God. The serpent said, if you eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you will be like God. And ever since Adam, the human race has been trying to usurp God's unique position. Then came Jesus, and He refused to take advantage of His equality with God. And so, in His life we notice, Jesus accomplishes the task of Israel, God's servant-people, dying under the weight of the world's sin. He is thus revealed not only as the truly human one, the true Israel, but as the embodiment of the God who is Israel's only saviour and LORD. That is how Paul understands the way Jesus became the Lord and he also wants the Philippian Christians to grasp this important fact: He is indeed the Lord.

It is one thing to be proclaimed and acclaimed the Lord, it is quite another thing for Jesus to understand Himself to be the Lord. Did Jesus ever understand Himself to be the Lord? The self-understanding of Jesus is quite a fascinating aspect of modern research in academic study. I doubt very much whether we should employ modern psychoanalysis to help us understand Jesus' self-understanding.

This Sunday's gospel reading provides two important aspects to understand Jesus' self-understanding as the Lord. The background of the story is that Jesus had performed a dramatic action in the Temple. I hope we understand Jesus' action has a hidden meaning, a veiled claim to kingship. We know that in Jewish tradition, only God's anointed king, the Messiah, has greater authority than the chief priests in the Temple. The Old Testament informs us it is King David's

intention to build the Temple of the Lord. But it is his son King Solomon who actually built it. When the Temple was ignored and disused by subsequent kings, restoration of it came through King Josiah. Hence what Jesus did in the Temple points to the fact that He behaved as though He had the right to do what only the Messiah could do. So naturally, the chief priests came and ask him: by what right are you doing all this? And who gave you this right?

Please don't think that Jesus' reply with a reference to John the Baptist was purely accidental. It certainly isn't just a trick, designed to confuse and embarrass them, though it succeeded in doing that as well.

Why a reference to John the Baptist? Only the right of the Messiah can challenge the whole Temple system. The chief priests want to know where this authority of Jesus came from. But I hope you know where it came from. We know that Jesus had already been anointed by God, with the Holy Spirit, through John's baptism. That is where He was first declared to be God's beloved Son, in other words, the Messiah. So, if the Jewish leaders truly understood what John had been doing, they would know where Jesus got the right to behave as the Messiah in the Temple courts.

Therefore we understand that, from the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus clearly had already known that He was the beloved Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord. Without this self-understanding, we may doubt whether He would act so dramatically in the Temple.

One may accept and believe the Lordship and Messiahship of Jesus; one may not. This is the point of the Parable of the Two Brothers. In the original context, it means that some believe John to be the prophet but some don't. Some people did what John said, even though they looked like rebels against God, these are the first son of the Parable. They stand for the tax-collectors and prostitutes. Their daily life seemed to be saying 'No' to God, but when they heard John they changed their mind and their life-style (In other words, they repented). Other people refused to do what John said, even though they looked like God's chosen ones. These are the second sons. They stand for the Temple hierarchy and other religious leaders. They look as though they're doing God's will, worshiping in the Temple; but they refused to believe in John's message, not only about repentance but also about the Messiah who was standing unknown in their midst.

The parable presents a serious challenge to all of us. Do we know Jesus is the Lord and therefore respond to His calling to follow Him wherever He leads us? Our worship must conform to Paul's saying that we must confess Jesus as Lord. But that means we must have already repented, that is, changed our life-style.

Jesus came to the Temple and challenged the authority. He now bids us to follow Him to challenge the powers of the present world with the news that He is indeed its rightful Lord. When we challenge the world, people would ask, 'By what right are you doing that?' Can we answer with such a lofty and excellent answer as Paul had done in Philippians 2.5-11? Be ready always to tell the stories about Jesus Himself. That is one way to prove that you confess Him as your Lord.