

Reading: Matthew 21:23-32

There is an old saying: *Actions speak louder than words.*

I heard of a brand new building erected in Sydney. It was mostly office space and it went up 54 floors. The investors were very excited about it, looking forward to all the money rolling in from the tenants. Unfortunately it was a mirror glass building, much like many going up here in Christchurch. The glass went from floor to ceiling. When it came time for the office workers to put their desks in the new offices few, if any, wanted to sit right by the window. It was okay on the first and second floors - you could see the trees outside. Some hardy individuals even put their desks right by the window on the third and fourth floors. But, from there on up, everyone felt unsafe.

Wouldn't you if you were looking down on Sydney with only a thin piece of glass between you and the ground below?

Up on floor number 54 there were only a few desks huddled around the central pillar. This was a hopeless situation, it meant the investors couldn't get the rental they needed to pay back the lenders. So the manager called a meeting. "We must do something," he said. "I have here the report from the engineer saying just how safe this building is." So they emailed everyone in the building. "Words are cheap," was the talk at the water cooler. "We aren't going near those windows." The investors had another meeting. This time they invited the architect. "I know what I'll do," she said, "Call another meeting, this time with everyone on the top floor." So they did. Everyone jammed into the floor. "Make a space," she said "Between me and the window." Without another word, starting in the middle of the floor, she ran with all her strength and speed towards the windows. At the last minute she turned to present her shoulder to the glass. The window held. The architect, for her part, was taken to the sick bay with a seriously damaged shoulder. Slowly, but with increasing confidence, the workers began to move their desks. If anyone new came they simply told them the story of how the architect risked her life to prove the safety of the glass. Today you will still find desks and people right up to the window. In fact, many enjoy the view.

We have in our gospel for today a story about two sons. It helps to put the parable into context: Jesus is in the temple, and the chief priests and elders are questioning his "authority". Jesus knows he is at the end of his journey, this is the last week of his life. He is about to suffer and die at the hands of the temple leaders. He has been healing and teaching about the kingdom of God, and the temple authorities want to know "by what authority" he is doing these things?

They question his good works. And so he questions their works... and our works... by telling this story about the two sons. The point is simply this: "Actions speak louder than words."

That reminds me of the young curate who once distributed a survey in church one Sunday. Among the questions was: "Do you think there should be an evening Bible Study?" He was overwhelmed by the response...over 75% of the congregation indicated that "Yes", there should be an evening Bible Study. So the young curate began making plans to teach a night time Bible Study. A few days later, a retired vicar in the church, a much older and wiser person, came to him and gently advised him that he had asked the wrong question in the survey. So the next Sunday a new survey was passed out with the question: "Would you attend an evening Bible Study?" The result was quite different. From the first 75% who answered "Yes", only twelve people indicated that they would actually attend the night time Bible Study the pastor was planning to offer. **ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS!**

But before we beat ourselves up too much the parable is also a parable of grace and of forgiveness. The parable Jesus tells of the two sons is a sad account of how things often are. One disrespectfully refuses his father's request, but then later thinks better of it. The other respectfully says "Yes Sir." to his father, but never follows through with his promise. The second son was like the man who had been fired from his job for never working. He soon asked his ex-employer to write him a letter of recommendation. His ex-boss wrote: "Dear Sir/Madam, If you can get John to work for you, you will be extremely fortunate."

I like this parable because Jesus, as always, leaves room for grace. It's okay to be unsure. It's okay to doubt. It's okay to come through at the last minute.

I get great encouragement from the saints, and St Francis of Assisi once said, "Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary use words."

In our times of deepest need it is the actions of others that speak most loudly. When my father died suddenly when I was just 17, I can't recall a single thing that anyone said to me. But I can tell you who hugged me. I can tell you who visited us. I can tell you who brought food around. I can tell you who held my hand.

Henri Nouwen writes "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is the person who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, has chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not

healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”

May our actions speak louder than our words.