

**October 1, 2017 Keeping Promises Homily:** In G.K. Chesterton's masterful work, "*Orthodoxy*", he devotes a delightful chapter to the significance of fairy tales. The renowned author finds more wisdom in those popular stories than in many of the literary classics of the past. In a typical fairy tale, maintains Chesterton, the storyteller hopes to teach his readers, young and old, a much needed lesson. One lesson, in particular, is worthy of mention, in view of the today's gospel reading, the parable of the Two Sons: Failing to fulfill a promise brings a curse on the one guilty of betraying the truth. Consider the following examples:

- 1) In the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, a young boy promises his mother to sell the family cow for money. Beguiled by a peddler, he sells the cow for three magic beans. After the beanstalk reaches magical heights, he climbs the beanstalk and finds himself in the land of the giants. He hears the ominous cry of a giant: "Fi, fy, fo fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman";
- 2) In the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, the young girl promises to follow the path to her grandmother's house. Instead, she wanders off the path and later meets the big, bad wolf; and
- 3) In the story of Snow White and the seven dwarfs, she promises her diminutive friends that she would not speak to strangers. She fails to keep her promise. She talks to a witch cleverly disguised as an old woman, who hands her an apple. Young Snow White eats the apple, and soon falls into a deep sleep.

By failing to be true to our word, we suffer the likely penalty for deception and mendacity. Here is the setting for today's gospel. (Mt.21:28-32) Jesus is in Jerusalem. Tensions are mounting. Opposition to the rabbi from Nazareth has reached a fever pitch. The religious authorities have but one goal: to discredit Jesus and bring him down. The mystery of the cross looms.

In the parable of the two sons, there is an obvious tension between saying and doing, talk and action. The vineyard is an image of Israel, God's chosen people. The father of the two sons is a symbol of God, the Heavenly Father. In the parable the first son initially defies his father. After having a change of heart, he decides to obey his father and go into his vineyard to labor in his behalf. The first son represents converted sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes, who embraced fully John the Baptist's call to repentance and are now worthy to fulfill the father's wishes. To be called to labor in the vineyard of the Lord is an honor and a blessing. The second son promises his father that he will obey his father's command. "I will go", he declared. He paid his father lip service. He has no intention of keeping his promise. The second son represents the religious establishment of His day. They claim that they do God's will but actually fail to do so. In Our Lord's justly famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus issues a warning to his hearers: "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom but only he who does the Will of my Father in heaven". (Mt.7:21)

Just consider how often we are disappointed by those who make promises and have no intention of fulfilling them: The politician who promises to lower taxes and fails to honor his commitment; The groom who makes solemn promises on his wedding day and is not true to his word; The parents who promise to raise their child in the practice of the faith, and disappear without a trace after the sacrament of baptism is administered.

Keep in mind that God gives us the strength to keep our promises. We have the sacraments and the prayers of the saints to sustain us on our journey of faith. At the end of the day it is Christ himself who is our role model, the servant who labored in the vineyard as the Father's beloved Son. As St. Paul says in his famous hymn, "Christ took the form of a slave" (or servant). (Phil 2:7)

Chesterton's chapter on "*the ethics of Elfland*" in his book "*Orthodoxy*" underscore the importance of being true to one's word and the serious consequences of failing to do so. It is a lesson Chesterton may have learned from Christ Himself!

Amen!