26th Sunday

This Sunday the Lord presents to his sceptics and cynics the story of the two sons working in the vineyard. He is inviting those present by means of this parable to be obedient. In order that the message goes home he pitches it from both extremes: the feigned obedience of those who talk but don't walk; who say one thing with their lips and another with their actions; and the other extreme of those who manifest reluctant obedience or who are slow to obey. Those Jews in his divine presence err in the first category for their hearts are hardened against him yet they won't admit it with their words, while the other represents the non Jews or gentiles that will eventually obey God's Son, in time, through the ministration of Saint Paul.

In etymological terms the word obedience, as the Catechism explains, means to hear another – in this case to submit one's will to a higher authority. How difficult this is! Who wants to be submissive? At the end of the day all persons are called to obey God.

Ezekiel, one of the four major prophets, tells us to obey God and stop thinking of your own interests and Saint Paul's letter provides us with his sublime poetic affirmation about Christ's obedience and submission: he even emptied himself while assuming our humanity … even to accepting death on a cross. If God's Son could obey, how can we not?

So how do we hear God's word? How do we know what to obey? After submission to the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments, we are called to open our hearts to comply with God's will according to our vocation.

On this migrant and refugee Sunday, we when think about the just plight of those genuine refugees who are seeking God's will in another land, we should remind ourselves that here in Australia, most of our ancestors, once upon on a time were in a similar position. Choices had to be made and some were tough. Obedience is rarely easy. In order that we are truly obedient, God asks us to trust him. That is, to listen to his voice and follow him.

One such person who did so, and whose remains I have prayed before in Paris is Saint Vincent de Paul, whose feast is today. He died in 1660 at the age of 79 years old. Born of French peasants, he grew up in poverty as one of six children. Being a remarkable student, the family made many sacrifices so he could enter the seminary. Being most grateful, he studied hard and completed his studies in Canon Law at the University in Paris. The young priest was assured of a noted career in the Church. But, then, a most unlikely event changed his path forever. In 1605, while sailing from Marseille he was kidnapped by Muslim pirates who took him to Tunis, a massive city of the Arab world, where he was sold as a slave. Indeed, he was sold and bought three times. At this time, it is claimed that Fr. Vincent prayed that if he was released he would dedicate his life to assisting the poor. His last master, curiously, was an ex Franciscan priest who had three wives and was living – or perhaps hiding - in a remote mountain village. In time, Vincent convinced the second wife that Christianity was the true religion and she with his help managed to bring this fallen cleric back to the faith and both returned to France in 1607.

After further studies, and being acquainted with the royal court, Vincent was appointed chaplain to the wealthy Gondi family. Later the Countess Gondi would provide much financial support to his apostolate to assist the poor and needy. Nor did he ever forget about his time as slave, for in 1622 he was appointed as a chaplain to the galleys. As a result, he was instrumental in ransoming 1200 galley slaves from North Africa. At that time, he also established the Congregation of the Missions, the Vincentians who provide care and assistance to those in need and the formation of missionary priests. In order to care for the sick, with St. Louise de Marillace he co-founded the Daughters of Charity. Throughout his sixty years of priestly service to the poor and needy, he complied with obedience to God's will, irrespective of what peculiar or dire circumstances surrounded him; Muslims, royals or the rich. In spite of his large nose and beady eyes, Fr. Vincent had a heart of gold for those in need, perhaps for that reason God has preserved his heart, as incorrupt, in the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal in Paris.

Lastly, his genuine love for the poor continued, for only thirteen years later, inspired by this legacy, Frederic Ozanam, founded the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, which today exists in 153 countries and provides exemplary care in our own diocese. Much good comes from hearing and doing the will of God. Saint Vincent pray for us.