

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

REFLECTION 1:

THE LOVING FATHER

The Gospel you have just heard has been called the greatest short story in the world. Under Jewish law a father was not free to leave his property as he liked. The eldest son must get two-thirds and the younger one-third. So there was a certain heartless callousness in the request of the younger son. He was saying in effect as scripture scholar Kenneth Bailey intimates a mid-eastern death wish on the father – 'I want my portion now even before you pass on!' The father did not argue as he realises that his son must learn the hard way. Without delay the son got his share of the property and left home. He soon spent the money and he finished up feeding pigs, conscious of the Semitic saying, 'cursed is the one who feeds swine'. Jesus now pays sinful humanity a compliment, 'When he came to himself'. An absence of God in one's life prevents someone from being one's true self. As St. Augustine observed restlessness besets the human breast that cannot be assuaged till the heart is focussed on God. Jesus never believed that one could glorify God by denigrating human beings. So the son decided to return home and plead to be taken back, not so much as a son but a hired servant – someone who could be instantly dismissed without giving any reason. The son came home and his father never gave him a chance to ask to be a servant. He brushed aside the son's carefully prepared speech. First the robe is to be donned – it stands for honour, the ring for authority and the shoes a sign of freedom. And a feast

was prepared so all could rejoice at the wanderer's return. This parable is usually referred to as the Prodigal Son, but it could also be called the parable of the loving Father, for it speaks more about the father's love than the son's sin. It tells us a great deal about the forgiveness of God. The father must have been waiting for the son to return home, for he saw him a long way off. When he returned, the father forgave him with no recriminations, no 'telling-off'. It is so sad when someone is forgiven with a hint of a threat and the wagging finger. Genuine forgiveness should be conferred as a favour, the father treating the son as if he had never been astray. It is the marvel of the love of God that he treats us in this way.

But this is not the end of the story. We are now introduced to the elder son, the prodigal's brother, who is actually sorry that his sibling has returned. He stands for the self-righteous Pharisees who would rather see the sinner destroyed than being saved. His attitude shows that his years of obedience to the father had been years of grim duty and not of loving service. He is utterly devoid of any sympathy. He refers to the prodigal, not as my brother but as 'your son'. He might have kicked him further into the gutter when he was already down. He also has a nasty mind. There was no mention of prostitutes until the elder son mentions them. He suspected his brother of the sins he himself would have liked to commit. It unfolds the wonderful truth that it is easier to confess to God than to another person, and that God is more merciful in his judgements than many righteous people, that God can forgive when we refuse to forgive or delay forgiveness for an indeterminate time. In the face of a love like that we cannot be other than lost in wonder, love and praise.

REFLECTION 2:

WELCOME HOME

Dutch theologian, scripture scholar and prolific author Henri Nouwen first encountered Rembrandt's 'The Return of the Prodigal Son' on a poster at the l'Arche community in France. That encounter prompted Nouwen to go to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg Russia in order to see the original. There he received permission from the curators to be alone with the painting. Nouwen spent hours there in prayerful contemplation. The result was his fine book, 'The Return of the Prodigal Son' (1992). There, on the fading canvas of this famous painting, we can gain an insight into the merciful Father, ever present and ever welcoming to each and all of us - God remains constant, our centre, our focus, our home where we will always find a welcome.

Throughout their long and checkered history, the people of Israel knew well the experience of coming home to God. From the time they were called to follow Moses into the desert and then onto the land promised them by God, a strong sense of homecoming urged them on. When they sinned and turned their back on their Creator and Redeemer, God did not give up. Time and time again, God's mercy brought them home to the house of healing and forgiveness. As is reported in today's first reading from Joshua, God's mercy was celebrated each year on the feast of Passover. There they remembered the story of their beginnings and praised the God who never ceased calling them home.

'Be reconciled to God' is the rallying cry from St. Paul in our second reading today (Cor 5:17-21). It could be our mantra for the remaining weeks of Lent. God's arms are open wide, ready to embrace us. God's mercy is overflowing. We question if we're good enough. We are embarrassed by our failings. We say we'll do it tomorrow – that we will pray more, that we will treat others with kindness, that we will accept God's love fully, tomorrow. It's a decision we need to make daily, that God's loving mercy is abundant and his embrace ready for us.

Turning to the uniquely Lucan parable of the Prodigal Son, we might sense an invitation to find ourselves in the text - with whom do we identify ourselves at this time in our lives? Are we that wayward son

whose dream of a happy and wealthy life evaporated in a pigsty in a foreign land - now returning home in shame and sorrow, kneeling before his father. He knows he has dishonoured his father and himself. He knows he does not deserve it but he relies on the goodness of his father and surrenders himself to his love and mercy. Or, perhaps we might see ourselves in the dutiful and resentful elder son. His anger makes him bitter, he refuses to rejoice and share in the celebration because he does not understand his father's love. Or, do we see ourselves in the father? Any parent can sympathize with this generous man whose child's actions hurt him. We can sympathize – but can we be as welcoming and forgiving? This is the challenge Jesus puts before every parent today and every day.

Whether we are the younger son or the elder one, we have to realise that we are all called to become like the father, the enduring love of the Father who gives us a powerful lesson on how to forgive. It makes sense.