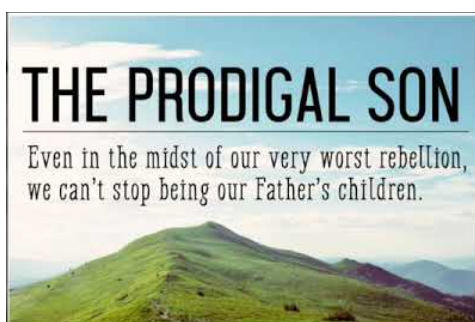


LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GOSPEL

Luke 15:1-3,11-32 (separate sheet)

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FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

27th March 2022

It could be said that there are two important journeys in the great parable of the Prodigal Son. One is that of the younger brother who realises the foolishness of his ways and turns towards home not sure what to expect and certainly not expecting what he finds there.

The other journey is, at least in distance, much shorter. It is that of the older brother who remains out in the fields unable to make the brief trip home because of his rage and anger.

In Lent the focus is usually on the long return home but it might well be that for many of us the real challenge is to recognise in ourselves the desire to limit God's mercy to those we consider worthy. Such a mindset may still keep us away from our true home with the Father.

Reflection

What Paul is saying about reconciliation is explained in the gospel for today not by concepts or ideas but in the story of the Prodigal Son. If the season of Lent were to come and go without us giving time to thinking about reconciliation, then something would indeed be missing. It would be tragic if we came to Easter without being moved by the overwhelming compassion of our God who seeks out the lost and celebrates our return to him.

It would also be tragic if we were to forget that as we welcome God's forgiveness for ourselves then we automatically become ambassadors of that forgiveness to others. We must be careful not to end up like the older brother who is resentful of God's generosity to the undeserving.

SEAN GOAN—Let the Reader Understand, Year C

KIND OF WRITING

Our reading is a parable. As such, it is meant to destabilise the hearers and put them "in crisis", literally in the "critical" position of having to make a judgement (= krisis in Greek). In its context here, it is also incipiently allegorical – the father could be God, the faithful son, the Pharisees, the prodigal son, the tax-collectors and sinners and so forth).

Thought for the day

Both sons have misconstrued the relationship with their father. The older son wants to relate on a basis of servile loyalty (allegorically, the Law). The younger son, on his return, wishes to relate on the basis of confession of sin and desires to be treated as a slave. The father rejects both projections. Servile loyalty and guilt are not unknown in the Christian tradition!

KIERAN O'MAHONY OSA—www.tarsus.ie

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Like many a parable, this story makes its point in a way that seems to be unfair: the spendthrift son is rewarded and the elder son is left hurt and angry. People often empathise with him. Neither son understood the nature of love. The younger son did not recognise what a treasure he had at home and walked out on it. Then he 'came to himself' and returned home. Where and when have you experienced a homecoming by becoming aware of love you had previously not recognised? What helped you to come to yourself and make that journey home?

2. The older son resented the party given to the younger son after his wandering and dissolute life – forgetting that all the father had was his. He is a symbol of us when we set ourselves up to decide when and how others should show their love, affection and gratitude. Such expectations fail to respect the freedom of others and make us vulnerable to the pain of unmet expectations. These can be fertile ground for hurt and resentment. What helps you to respect the freedom of others, and to recognise their love even if it is not expressed just as you would like?

3. Love is a free gift, not something we earn by our goodness. Recall the wonder of experiencing love when you did not expect it. You may even have thought you were not worthy of it. When has the experience of human love, freely given, prompted you to reflect on God's love for you?

JOHN BYRNE OSA—Intercom

The return of the 'Prodigal Son' and the incredible welcome of the father have touched every generation of Christians. The parable, however, also speaks of the older son, a man who stays by his father's side without following the disordered life of his brother, now far from home. Informed of the party thrown by the father for the lost son, he is baffled. Unlike his father, he is not happy his brother has returned. He is furious. 'He became very angry and refused to go in' to join the feasting. He had never left the house and now he feels a stranger among his own people.

The father goes out to invite him with the same affection with which he had welcomed his brother. With loving humility he tries to persuade him to take part in the welcoming party. That's when the son loses his temper and displays his bitterness. He had spent his life doing what the father wanted of him, but he did not learn to love as the father did. All he can do now is to demand his rights and run down his brother.

This is the tragedy of the older son. He had never left the house but his heart had always been far from home. He knows how to carry out orders but he does not know how to love. He does not understand how his father can still love his lost son. He does not welcome or forgive or want to have anything do with his brother. Jesus ends his parable without satisfying our curiosity. Did he join in the party or stay away?

Caught up in the religious crisis of modern society, we are accustomed to speaking in terms of believers and unbelievers, of practicing and non-practicing Catholics, of marriages blessed by the Church and "bad" marriages. We may continue to classify God's children, but God keeps waiting for us all. God is not the property of good people nor of practicing Christians. God is the Father of all.

The "older son" is a label for those of us who believe we live close to God. What are we doing, those of us who have not left the church? Are we merely safeguarding our religious survival by observing as well as we can all that is prescribed, for are we witnesses to the great love of God for all his children? Are we building open communities that know how to understand, welcome and accompany those who seek God in spite of doubts and questions? Do we raise barriers or build bridges? Do we regard them with hostility or do we extend the hand of friendship?

JOSÉ A PAGOLA—Following in the Footsteps of Jesus, Year C

The main topic here is forgiveness, and the real challenge in the story is what happens after the last son returns.

This gospel shows us that God returns those who are lost to the community, regardless of the obstacles that we might put in place. Jesus teaches a lesson here in radical hospitality. No matter how far one wanders from home, God still loves us, waits for us and is calling us back with open arms. The elder brother has a choice: he can come to the party or feel sorry for himself. It will cost him nothing to reach out to his younger brother, but his ego is in the way. What does he do? Significantly, Luke does not finish the story; rather he leaves it up to us to continue the narrative. We have nothing to lose in welcoming home the lost.

Forgiveness is a decision, but it is not always easy and can bring up difficult emotions. Bring to mind someone you find difficult to forgive. Send peace to the person or into that situation. Make this part of your regular spiritual practice if you can.

TRÍONA DOHERTY & JANE MELLET—GO DEEPER

Verses 1 to 3 are one of several passages in the gospels which give us an overall picture of Jesus' lifestyle. In your meditation, identify who for you are "the tax collectors and sinners," people who are outsiders to the community; then, who is Jesus, and finally, who are "the Pharisees and Scribes" who complain.

The main part of the passage is, of course, the parable of the Prodigal Son, one of the most touching passages in the whole Bible, and indeed of all religious literature. It is also the longest parable in the gospels, and so you will have to concentrate on one section of it.

Though it is usually called the parable of the Prodigal Son, it really speaks of three people, and we can meditate profitably on each of them.

Don't neglect the older son. His story too is very significant for us, and especially for us religious people. His basic attitude is in verses 25 to 30, and when he meets his father in verses 31 to 32.

Scripture reflection

Lord, every Church community, without realizing it, gradually becomes an exclusive group, where we speak a language that only we understand and whole categories of people feel uncomfortable; but you always send Jesus to open up the community.

One such person was Pope John XXIII.

We remember how every kind of person sought his company and wanted to hear what he had to say, and he in turn welcomed them and ate with them.

Some in the Church complained, but the world was grateful because they recognized that Jesus was present among them.

MICHEL DE VERTEUIL—Lectio Divina on the Sunday Gospels