

4th Sunday in Lent + 30 March 2025 + Jos 5:9-12 + 2 Cor 5:17-21 + Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

The parable of the Prodigal Son and Father in our Gospel today gives us perhaps the best image of the relationship between God the Father and we as His children in all the Gospels. We can't even begin to plumb the depths of this parable, which could offer us a lifetime of points to ponder. But let's begin by considering the setting. That is, Jesus tells this parable in response to the protests of the scribes and Pharisees over His scandalous habit of eating with public 'sinners', rendering Himself ritually unclean. So Jesus directs this parable not just at the so-called 'sinners', represented by the younger son, but also to those who considered themselves to be righteous with no need to repent, as represented by the older son. So let's first see what we can glean from the sad story of the younger son.

The younger son begins by making a very offensive demand: *Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.* In effect, the son is saying, *'Father, you are as dead to me, so give me my inheritance now!'* Think of how insulting and hurtful this must have been to the father! And yet amazingly, rather than disowning the son without any inheritance as would be his right, the father actually heeds the son's request. And then son throws it all away through *dissipation*, or "prodigal" living (prodigal means "wasteful" or "reckless").

So our first application: as our loving Creator and Father, God has given *everything* to mankind: love, life, family, hope, you name it: all is gift. And yet, the greatest gift to us is God Himself. All of the good things of creation that we love and enjoy are only reflections of the Father's goodness. And yet, so often, we don't see it that way. Like the younger son, many think they would be happier living by our own rules, without need for our Father. And the amazing thing is that God allows this: He gives us free will to ignore and even to disobey Him. Such is the dignity with which He regards us, as made in His own image and likeness.

But we also see here what this false idea of freedom from God leads to: *dire need* and *hunger*. We might miss it, but to Jesus' audience, the younger son's plight would have seemed beyond desperate. For Jews (Jesus' audience), the pig is an unclean animal; the implication here is that this son has sunk even lower than the lowest of animals. Which means that all of the things of this world that promised him happiness has not only left him unhappy, but quite literally, on death's doorstep. He has only one hope left—his father. So he *rises* from his living death, and goes "home": that is, where the Father is. This 'turning around' *from* sin and death and *toward* life, toward the Father, is an image of conversion—something that all of us are called to, not just during Lent, but every moment of our lives.

I want to skip past the younger son's homecoming for a moment, and move on to the older brother. The older son, as we said, is an image of the Pharisees and the scribes. He is an image of all who think they are righteous and have no need for God's mercy. But I think it's easy to find some sympathy for the older son: such as, why do "big sinners" seem to get the easy life? Why do those who try to do the right thing suffer so much? Isn't the Father being

unfair? How can He seem to treat the loose-living younger son better than the dutiful and hard-working older son? So what is the Father's defense for such seeming injustices?

The key to unlocking the problem of the older son is found in the Father's reply: *My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.* That is the reward for fidelity—God Himself! If we have the gift of God Himself, the gift of the Father, then we have all that is God's too! We don't know why the older son couldn't see this; perhaps it was because he was more like his younger brother than he would care to admit. After all, when the welcome home party for his brother began, the older son also refused to enter the house of his Father. And so the Father once again goes out, to welcome home yet another lost son.

So while this parable is often called the "Prodigal Son," the real hero, the real focal point is the Prodigal Father—the Father who is 'reckless' in mercy. Notice how the Father never moves in this story; where he is, is 'home.' The only time He moves is when he goes running after the son who had wished his death, and when he goes out after the older son whose heart is far from him. This is very instructive: I think often we have this idea that when we sin, it is as if God gets mad at us, leaves us, and perhaps reluctantly comes back to us when we repent. Our parable reveals that this idea is completely backwards. Rather, sin is when *we* willfully choose to leave the Father. Repentance, then, is choosing to come home. And what does the Father do at the very first glimpse of our movement back toward Him? He runs to us, showers gifts of mercy upon us, and even throws a party! Which is why just prior to this parable in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says that there is *more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance* (15:7).

One more consideration: this parable would have shocked Jesus' audience, and so it really should shock us too. Because it reveals two extremes in relation to God: either fearing that we are too sinful to be able to receive the Father's mercy, or thinking we are pretty much good enough as is, with no need for the Father's mercy. The Father could have easily disowned his son. But instead, He was waiting, and overjoyed when He came home. But the older son needed mercy too: he may have been dutiful, but his heart was far from home. Neither son really understood the depths of their Father's love for them. Neither do we. So goes human history. And yet the Father remains, watching, waiting, and pleading for each of us to come home to Him, and to stay home. As a good Father, that's all He wants.

Finally, a word on our 1st reading. So far through Lent, we have frequently reflected on the Israelite's difficult journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, as an image of the spiritual battle we face on our pilgrimage to our true home in heaven. Today, the 1st reading records the time when the Israelites finally arrive in the Promised Land. There, the Manna ceased, just as the Sacraments will cease in heaven, where we will *taste and see the goodness of the Lord*; not under Sacramental signs, but as He really is. Heaven is our goal; it is our home. And the battle against sin, the constant choice to repent, is the way for us to remain with the Father now on earth, until we are finally at home with Him for all eternity.