

Fourth Sunday of Lent

“My son, we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come back to life again; he was lost and has been found.” Luke 15, 1-3, 11-32

An unusual aspect of the parable that is central to today's gospel-reading is that it takes its name from a character who really has little to do with its message. The parable of the prodigal son is essentially about each of us. Moreover, practiced story-tellers are in the habit of saying that their stories begin when they stop talking. As we leave the church after hearing this parable, we have to decide how we will complete the story. In the process of telling the parable, Jesus has held up to us a mirror in which we see in our own lives characteristics of both the younger and elder brother.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. It's important first to look at the context in which Jesus told this parable. At the start of Chapter 15 of his Gospel, Luke records that “tax collectors and public sinners were all seeking the company of Jesus” (Luke 15, 1). At the same time there was a group of Pharisees and scribes criticising Jesus because “he welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15, 3). The scribes and Pharisees were educated men who had a responsibility to hold up the Law and set the social and religious standards for guiding the lives of the ordinary people. The younger son clearly fitted into the category of “public sinner”. His behaviour had excluded him from the community: he had publicly humiliated his father in that he demanded his share of the family inheritance before his father had died, and he squandered it on a life of debauchery. He lost all self-respect by hiring himself out to look after a gentile's pigs - anathema to his religion. His motivation for returning home was based on self-interest. In his favour was the fact that he recognised that he had become a public sinner.

The elder brother has also sinned, but his sins are not on public display. His sins are secret. What's more, he seems unable to acknowledge that he has done anything amiss. By calling his own brother “that son of yours” to his father's face, he not only dissociates himself from his brother but signals that he, too, has abandoned his family. As the elder brother in the family, he knew that the Jewish Law required him to go out after his younger brother and to do his best to dissuade him from pursuing his errant ways. If anyone in the family should have gone out every day looking for his brother it was he, not his elderly father. In that vein, it's important that we not overlook that, in telling this story as he shares a meal with public sinners, Jesus has adopted the stance of an elder brother reaching out to those who have been ostracised, to those on whom the scribes and Pharisees have hung labels, and whom they have chosen to abandon.

Surely, there's a clear message here for all of us who have responsibilities in our Church because of our position, status or years of service, just as there is a message for those of us who have family responsibilities as carers for our younger siblings.

And there is a clear message for every single one of us in the way the parable ends, with the strong implication for those watching on to provide a final line. The father says to the servants:

“This son was dead and has come back to life; was lost and is found”(Luke 15, 24).

And to his elder son his last words are:

“This brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; was lost and now is found” (Luke 15, 32).

And to the scribes and Pharisees Jesus’ unspoken message is surely something like: “You too are lost and without life for as long as you stay aloof and refuse to reach out to your brothers and sisters in the community, who have sinned and gone astray.”

The God-figure in the parable, of course, is the father. He has no time for vindictiveness, recriminations or corrections. He does not lecture the younger son or question why he returned. He offers the older son an opportunity and a reason to join the celebration, but leaves him completely free to choose for himself. That’s the very kind of freedom he gave the younger son as he set off with his share of the inheritance. That’s how God treats us. God reaches out to us, but applies no compulsion.

If there is one message that this parable displays in lights, it is that God’s love, compassion and forgiveness are not earned. They are freely given. Yet, there are times in our lives when, in the midst of illness and misadventure, we tell ourselves that we deserve better because we have kept all the rules and been faithful to the religious practices expected of us. That approach can lead us to thinking that we, like the scribes and Pharisees, are a cut above our sisters and brothers, especially those who have disgraced themselves publicly. We can delude ourselves into the kind of reasoning the elder brother demonstrated: he gave himself a high mark for his fidelity, for his holding the family farm together. He failed to take stock of his resentment and anger, and he was convinced that he was the victim of his father’s extravagant welcome to his younger brother.

This, then, is a parable that invites us to try on the roles of all three characters. We know that we have been the younger son and need to face up to our selfishness and thoughtlessness that have been a cause of division in our families and communities and have caused hurt to others. We are called, too, to be like the forgiving father who is sufficiently openhearted to reach out in forgiveness to those who have rejected and hurt us. And we are challenged to set aside the kind of self-justification pursued by the older brother; to recognise that we can be locked into brooding over the insults and outrage that the behaviour of others has ignited in us; to be big enough to put a higher priority on working for reconciliation.

The linguists among us explain that the Greek word for forgiveness literally means “to let go”. To journey towards forgiveness means letting go of our tight hold on the painful past and looking to build a future full of hope, a future that welcomes our sisters and brothers whose failures have led them to falter. Now there’s a Lenten challenge for all of us!