

Luke 15: 11-32 “A PRODIGAL SON OR A PRODIGAL FATHER?”

I might have already told you the well-known story of the man who goes to the cinema, sits down comfortably looking forward to a good film but on seeing the famous Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer roaring lion, decides that he had already seen the movie and walks out of the cinema...

Well, it is easy to do the same with today Gospel passage: On hearing “there was a man who had two sons” we immediately recognize the beginning of what is traditionally called “the Parable of the Prodigal Son”, and we may decide, even unconsciously, that we do not have to pay much attention as we know and love that story so well.

This is in part because we can identify with the characters and the family dynamics in the story: the wild child who causes his or her parents a lot of pain and anxiety, the parent who displays an amazing capacity of forgiveness and love, because this is what good parents do or the sense of injustice felt by the other child - the good, responsible, and hard-working one: all very familiar indeed! But this parable also allows us to identify with more than one character: Who among us has not squandered the love we have been given, or chased after love, hoping it will be returned or still, felt the bitter sting of insecurity and fear at being left out and neglected?

The way that story has generally been understood, *theologically I mean*, is that it is about our relationship with God: When we say we’re sorry and we **repent**, whatever transgressions we are guilty of, we too will be forgiven and welcomed back into the family fold. This is what Lent is all about, isn’t, repentance and forgiveness and the wastefully extravagant immensity of God’s love: This is what “prodigal” means: lavish, abundant but also reckless and wasteful and those characteristics are applied to younger son, the one called the prodigal.

But interestingly the father also displays those somehow opposing characteristics: he is prodigal in his forgiveness: extravagant and amazing but he is also reckless and wasteful, at least according to the social rules of the collective culture of the time. How? Because not only he fails to discipline his son for his dishonourable and scandalous request to be given his share of the estate *while his dad is still alive* but the dad agrees! As a patriarch and a landowner, the father would have been despised by just about everybody in his community for being such an old fool who cannot be trusted to behave according to the rules of an agrarian society where the land was received from ancestors, held in trust for the following generations and therefore infinitely more precious than a bag of money.

But more was to come: when the son returns – with his sincerity very much in doubt if you read the text closely, as his so called confession is very carefully rehearsed – the father behaves in what would have been a ridiculous and shameful manner in that culture: when he spies his son coming from afar, not only he doesn’t send a servant, but he forgets all dignity, and **RUNS** down the road to welcome him. According to the customs of the time, apparently important men never ran in public! The expected thing for a dignified patriarch would have been to wait in the house in grim silence and let the young man be brought before him to grovel in the dust. Then the father would have reluctantly accepted his apologies and put him on probation. But **that** father does not do any of that: he doesn’t even let his son apologize but interrupts his more than suspicious words of regret and embraces him and kisses him **publicly**... What the father is doing here is voluntarily relinquishing all proper honourable behaviour because his love for his son is more important.

And he continues in the same vein: He would have been above the call of duty to have accepted the returning son as a hired man, but not for him a hay bale in a corner of the stables to sleep on, some old used tunic to wear and some stale pitta-bread to ward off hunger ... no, no, no! Nothing but a proper banquet and a proper party with the fatted calf reserved for some special occasion, the best robe, the best sandals and a ring on his finger, all adornments reserved for the most important people ... Really? Jesus' audience would have been aghast at all of this. That can't be, can it? Well, yes, it can because this is the way God loves us, unconditionally, fiercely, ridiculously, recklessly... This is not human love; it is God's love.

Now, that traditional interpretation is perfectly valid as it reminds us of the immensity of a love we don't deserve because God is not a bean counter and his love for us is not about deserving it, but about the vastness of divine grace which exceeds all human reason. This is very comforting indeed, but I wonder what we could discover if we stop allegorizing and therefore stop thinking of the father just as a stand-in for God... Our scriptures are not significant to us because they have meant the same sacred, fixed, rigid thing for 2000 years but because we can, **and we should**, look for something new, something fresh... If we think this particular parable - or any other for that matter - is only about one thing, then we close ourselves off to its depth and its possible teachings.

So with that perspective in mind, I invite you to have another look at what I personally think is the most interesting character: the older brother. He has been overwhelmingly portrayed as spiteful, mean-spirited, puritanical and self-righteous. **That actually, is really not fair and I feel, utterly wrong**: he is angry because he is really **hurt** and with good reason: he feels neglected and taken for granted by a father whom he has served for so many years out of love for him. He knew how much his dad missed his younger son so all these years he worked hard and faithfully to make up for the sense of loss and assuage the grief that his dad felt. So when the rogue comes back and he is feted in the most extravagant way, something breaks in him, it is too much and he can't take any more ... But besides the crying injustice towards him, he is also angry because his father's behaviour is irresponsible: That he should be happy to have his son back, ok, fair enough, he can understand that but what kind of 'family values' does his father communicate by throwing a big party for the entire village in honour of such a renegade when the family has had to live with the shame and the disapproval of that village because of him. What is the moral instruction in that? What about reaping what you sow?

Now what we see here is that anger is not always a moral failing. Sometimes it is justified in human terms and it is a window into what needs to be mended, healed and welcomed ... The famous American preacher Fred Craddock once turned the parable upside down to make just this point: in his sermon, he had the father slip the ring and the robe on the "elder" brother and kill the fatted calf in honour of his years of faithfulness and obedience. This daring ploy by such a gifted preacher elicited an interesting response from a woman who yelled from the back of the sanctuary "That's the way it "should" have been written!"

But of course, the story was NOT told that way ... because the point that Jesus probably wanted to make was that the father had lost, not one son, but two, **BOTH his sons were lost to him. So, he had to find both of them again.**

We know what he does about his younger son: discarding all honourable behaviour. But what does he do about his eldest son? Well, something which also flout all the social rules, something which is often overlooked by commentators: "He goes out to fetch his son and plead with him

to join the party” says the text. Why is this important? Because the same way that patriarchs did not run, they did not leave their place at the head of the table when guests were present, that would have been considered as the height of shameful behaviour. And patriarchs never pleaded with their children either, they told their children what to do. And actually “plead with him” is a weak translation of the Greek which is much stronger and conveys a sense of “rectifying a broken relationship”.

In fact, he **apologizes to his son by saying “we belong together, and we always will. You can have everything I still have.”** A patriarch apologizing was certainly not the norm, for sure, but then he adds something even more important: He says: “**Let’s celebrate, lets rejoice, come to the banquet of reconciliation because reconciliation means letting go of all the hurt that I have caused you. As 2 Corinthians says, it means doing something new. You might not be ready to forgive yet but just come and rejoice with us all and BELONG. Don’t cut yourself off ...**”

Now, we don’t know how the older son responds to that invitation. Jesus left the story open-ended, and it is up to us to finish it: it is up to us to decide whether we will stand outside, being right but alone and hurting **OR** take our place inside, rejoice and feel part of the family again.
AMEN