

LENTEN STUDY 5: The Good Father and his two Sons or the Parable of the Prodigal and Pouting Son. (Luke 15;11-32)

Jesus had a frequent eating ministry with tax collectors and sinners. One only ate with intimates, but Jesus shared his table with those whom the Pharisees regarded as losers. The Pharisees and Scribes were the definers and guardians of the Law; they were people of extreme ungrace; they were shocked as his act of eating rendered Jesus ritually impure as he mixed with pimps, muggers and the dregs of society. Jesus was saying "You think you know God, but God doesn't play by your rules." As mealy mouthed maggoty men, they righteously criticised his lenience towards sinners; they felt he had got his priorities wrong; they wanted the sinners to stay lost. Why bother with the likes of them? But Jesus saw both "the Separate Ones"/Pharisees and the perceived sinners as children of the Father and brothers and sisters to one another. He saw his mission as seeking the company of sinners, "for the Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost." (Luke 19:10). They believed in segregation; he believed in integration and association.

The story of the Prodigal Son cut clean across their view of God's love. Jesus did not say "You're wrong;" instead, he *told a story*. Using the example of the prodigal son, did Jesus tell this story because the Pharisees had remained in the home of the Covenant and had not wandered off like the older son; they had never broken the commandments; they stand outside the heavenly banquet while many other less desirables enter freely. (Luke 13: 28-30) (An unchurched woman named **Edith** came to faith when she heard read in church the *King James version* "Jesus receiveth sinners and **eateth** with them." She believed that she had been named and called.)

It would have horrified the community that a young son would ask for his share of the inheritance which would cripple the farm. It was an irresponsibly selfish, indulgently insolent, sullenly self-pitying and callously hurtful ask by the least likeable kid in town. Heartlessly, he was actually saying, "Dad, I haven't the patience to wait till you die. I wish you were dead now, so that I can get my greedy paws on my share to get out of this hole." He had convinced himself "My father is always yanking on my chain with his 'You shall nots.'" So he rejected his father's home, hearth and heart for the sinks and dives of the world. He had an obvious dysfunctional relationship with his father and brother. The father bore the blow in quietness, his only concern was to be loving and to allow junior the freedom to reject his love and position. If his son was to learn, it would be the hard way. The son outraged the village by destroying what was a successful farming operation, and outraged the people by further insulting his father in turning his share into ready cash (New English Bible translation). He left with pockets filled with money, which he had not earned, but which he spent freely on fair-weather friends who appeared as flies to honey. To the young lad, the grass was greener on the other side of the fence, but soon he could not afford the water bill to keep it so.

In a far country, far from the restraints and constraints of living in a family home, he lived literally 'high on the hog.' He had a real blast and tasted life to the fullest lest he miss something. In no time, he squandered all in reckless living. In a drastic cutting loose from the family traditions and community values handed on from father to son, he, who had it all, disregarded all that was holy and found he was very soon *less* than a pig because the pigs he herded and slopped could eat the kitchen waste but the swill was humanly indigestible to him. In slopping the unclean swine, in snatching mouldy husks to gnaw from their slavering jaws, he made himself ritually defiled. He must

have winced because a Jew could not go lower than this. Thus, he squandered a second inheritance, his Jewish faith. Sleeping rough, he had slumped to a degraded bottom of the pile, lost in a far country.

Where are we here? Do we ever want to find our own way by heeding the call of the far away country, by defiant deafness to the call of common sense and so leave the spiritual home of God's grace? Was he so steeped in guilt that he could not return home? We have the Church to which we may always return, a place of celebration.

Was it true repentance? Was it hunger for his father's love? Or, was it the grumbling cry of an empty stomach that made the lad come to his senses, caked in pig-slime-wretchedness and remorse? Whatever it was, he swallowed something more tasteless than corncobs, namely, his pride, and started home.

"I'm not less than a pig! I'm a human being! I am destitute and debased, but I am a son and I have a father and a real home. I can work off the debt as a wage-earning day labourer. Maybe, over years, they may invite me back into the family."

Note the use of the first person pronoun; he still has no thought for anyone but himself. On the way home, he rehearsed, "Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Note: he still speaks as if his dad is a slave-driver; he has yet to understand his father's love.

Once he had grievously hurt his good father, but, God-like, the father will show foolish love a second time, for genuine reconciliation can only be shown by self-emptying costly love. The penniless one may have let go of father, but father had not let go of son. His *action* was not *inaction*, for he waited and watched. Every day, dad had hunted the horizon until a gaunt, filthy, tattered and bent figure, appeared dragging himself home. He looked awful; he smelled of slop, not exactly the kind you would smother in kisses, as the father will do. Moved with pity, dad lifted up his robe and ran, undignified, to reach his son before a vindictive neighbour may spit or stone or curse the returning wastrel. Note: the father did not go to the pigpen to pull out the boy. The son has had to realize his own mistake. God used the pigpen to bring him to realization. Neither did the father face the broken boy with arms crossed and wait for the broken one to beg to be taken in, only to say, "You've chosen to live like a pig. Go back to your pigs."

With intense joy and prodigal forgiveness, dad wrapped his arms around the broken, exhausted boy like a mother hen, squeezing from him any chance of hearing his prepared bargaining request "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Wrong anyway! God's grace has made us daughters and sons in an unbroken covenant. Then he called, "Bring a robe! The best one! (the sign of father's honour to cover the pig-pen filth of his mistake), and a ring (engraved with family seal/intaglio), and sandals (slaves went barefoot), and kill the grain-fed calf." Had the father anticipated the return with the fattened-up-calf? The son is restored as heir again, a dead son come back to life, a lost son now found. He did not deserve to be treated better than a slave; that is what makes the father so magnificent in love.

In Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, the son has *not* lost everything. In the painting of the bedraggled kneeling figure, the boy has somehow kept his short dagger, the sign that he was once born noble. Starving, he could not sell this symbol of sonship. Even when debased, he was still a son. Even though starving, he could not sell this image of sonship. Rembrandt has clothed the father in a vibrant red robe, like a mother hen extending her pinions around her brood. There is more: the lad's

head is downy, sticky, like a new-born baby, or rather re-born, which dad presses against his stomach where his mother once held him. He clasps the lad to himself, one strong, muscular hand pressing the son is *male* and the other is refined and elegant *female*; for God is both father and mother.

This is where the parable becomes **the Pouting Son** . When the elder brother comes in from his daily work, caked with the steaming sweat of a slave, and hears the Karaoke that his dad has thrown as a home-coming party to offer his *shalom* to the young scamp, instead of his heart filling with joy at his brother's safe return, he becomes instantly indignantly immobilized with anger. He is a mirror image of the stern Pharisee, who would rather see a sinner destroyed than saved. There is no room for the returning brother in his heart. He demands that justice may override mercy. He is as far from his father's home and a broken relationship with his father as ever the younger waster was. He has sought his way to the father's heart, through grim, burdensome duty, never a loving service, but he has never learned to be a happy son. Jealous and ungenerous, he whines, "Listen! All the years I've slaved for you," which was not true, as the elder now owned everything. He had kept all the rules while his young brother was living it up; it just wasn't right! He was so ungrateful! Instead of thanking dad for all the good things he had received, he complained about all the things he didn't have such as a roly-poly prime corn-fed calf. Then, he exaggerated his brother's unstated sin, "I've never squandered your property on prostitutes like this son (write 'brat') of yours (which is what he would have done, for the worst wowsers are always impotently fascinated by porn). In all, like his younger brother, he used the personal pronoun five times.

The poor father tried to explain using an imperative, "Son, we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead and now, life has burst forth." He meant "It's my party. I want you to join me for my sake." Alas, the elder brother's mind was poisoned by the fallacy that God and dad love me only when I get everything right, only if I do good things constantly, dutifully, slavishly.

Does the elder son let his father/mother heal his nastiness? Does he of the poisoned mind join the party joy, or was he lost outside? Does he spit and stomp off to nurse his bitterness? Does he uncross his arms and allow his dad to put his arm around his shoulder and walk him in to the fun?

Story-teller Jesus left this door open for us, for we may be partly both sons? Are we like the elder, happy to exist in a house, but never choose to be at home to one-another? Are we like the elder, a stranger, separated from our love romance, our work relationships, who spurn the offer of acceptance? Are we ever given to the 'older brother' syndrome in the parish? We may gripe and grumble at newcomers with ideas for change "I don't mean to be critical, but we ought not to clap our hands in the hymns; things might get out of hand; I don't like baptisms in the Eucharist; It makes the service too long and the best lunch tables are taken by the time we get to Giorgios; I didn't like the vicar making a joke in church about who was really unhappy at the home-coming? the fattened calf." (These folk may be so scared of going out on a limb, they seldom come near the tree.)

Or, are we like the younger, who leaps at God's marvellous initiative to cry, "I will arise and go to my Father this Lent," only to hear him say "Strip off the grubby rags of unfaithfulness. Be re-clothed in your baptismal commitment. Put on the robe, ring, sandals of nobility, for you are my beloved daughter/son, in whom I am well pleased."

There is *no saint* without a past and *no sinner* without a future.

