



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday of Lent-Year C-March 31st 2019

Readings: Joshua 5: 9-12, Psalm 33, 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21,

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Few stories of Jesus are more popular or better known than that of the Prodigal Son. Certainly if you go into the Reconciliation Rooms of the post-Conciliar church you are likely to be confronted with Rembrandt's picture of the return, the kneeling, weeping, penitent son clasped into the folds of his father's robe, the father's hands resting gently, with profound relief and love, on his long lost son's shoulders.

Jesus tells this classic in the context of murmurings from the righteous (and the self-righteous) who are suspicious of His generosity and scandalised by the company He keeps. Instead of keeping Himself socially pure He mixes with the unrighteous. He goes after the lost sheep, He is not put off by their failures but has a heart impassioned by desire for their return and their salvation.

Nonetheless it is a shocking story. Who does not resonate a little with the complaint of the brother who, after years of hard graft sees this wretched wastrel return home to a glorious reception.

Years ago, in my last parish, there was a retired eccentric Welsh nurse called Doreen. Doreen had an unhappy life but was incredibly faithful – at Mass daily. When a young couple came for prayers for their mortally sick child and the child was healed, Doreen stomped into the sacristy: 'I suppose we're going to have miracles here every day, Father', she said

before turning on her heel. The following day Doreen came to me before Mass. 'I'm sorry, Father', she said 'it is wonderful news. I'm afraid I was just jealous. I'm here every day and nothing ever happens for me.'

I was able to remind Doreen (and myself) of the words of the Father in Jesus' parable. 'All I have is yours'.

The other truth is that, without the Doreens, there would have been no estate, no church for the desperate couple to bring their threatened child. Doreen knew that the real response of the heart, beyond the narrow selfishness of jealousy, was one of joy and thanksgiving and I often reflect, with gratitude, on her faithfulness and ruthless honesty. Of course our natural human sense of justice is that the Father behaved unreasonably. The truth is that our human justice is pretty mechanistic – you should get what you deserve. That is the basis of Karma – an utterly depressing, deterministic vision of the world. Mercifully the Christian Faith is founded on the immense generosity of God that we call Grace. Because of the sacrifice of Christ, the Father's ultimate gift of love, we do not get what we deserve. We are welcomed back the moment we turn homeward. Lost in a strange land – alienated by sin, starved of the bread of life and the companionship of the family, we retrace our steps and find the Father running out to meet us.

What brings the Prodigal to the point of return?

Well, he has exhausted his inheritance, there is nothing left of his patrimony. Jesus tells us in plain terms that the Prodigal has debauched himself. A word whose origin means to abandon one's duty it has come to mean the descent into the extremes of the dissolute life. The initial attractions and glamour of sin have vanished. The gaudy costumes of self indulgence and the beguiling lights of false liberty have been ripped away leaving the appalling truth of the poverty and the loneliness and the wretchedness of sin. The turning point comes when, starving, alone

in alien lands, reduced to tending the unclean and covered in their filth, Jesus tells us that the Prodigal 'came to himself'.

It's a simple but telling phrase. The lost boy remembered who he was. He was a son of the Father. He was made in the image of the Father. He would be better off as a servant on the Father's estate than a supposedly free man in this hell of sin and alienation. Remembering who he is he resolves to return and cast himself on the mercy of his Father. Weary from his debilitating travels, he heads home determined to seek mercy and reconciliation, humbled by his utter failure, dependent on the mercy of the one whose love he has betrayed.

He cannot have expected the Father to run out to embrace him, stinking and filthy as he was. He cannot have expected that, washed clean, he should be attired in soft robes. He cannot have expected a party to celebrate his confession and penitence.

But just as the prodigal has wasted his resources, so he returns to a Father who is profligate with his love. The prodigal is not a good investment seemingly but the Father's heart is not a calculator but rather a well of affection and mercy.

When we turn homeward, no power of ourselves to help ourselves, benighted with sin and starving for the bread of life, we meet the embrace of the Father, the warmth of His love and the reconciliation of the soul.

The other great religions major on Law, Judgement and Mechanistic Determinism – The Christian Faith alone encounters the heart of the Father and the fathomless depths of His mercy and love in Jesus.

Pilgrims all, prodigals many, coming to ourselves we are Homeward Bound.