

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent (Refreshment Sunday)

Today is Refreshment Sunday, also known as Mothering Sunday and Laetare Sunday (from the Latin term 'to rejoice'). The purple Lenten vestments are replaced this week with rose, as a sign of celebration, joy and beauty.

'Mothering Sunday' speaks of a tradition of returning to Mother Church, and special efforts were made to attend the Church in which you were baptised. The lectionary's use of the Prodigal Son as the Gospel passage for the day creates a suitable thread of reconciliation, reunion and rejoicing that fits the tone and significance of the day.

Today's Gospel passage, the Prodigal Son, is indeed a powerful story of forgiveness, reconciliation and love. Its context is interesting. Jesus tells this story because people are taking exception at him spending his time with those considered to be "sinners". As Jesus already said in the fifth chapter of the Gospel: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

So he tells them a story about seeking repentance and being reconciled.

While the younger son may appear to be the central figure of the story, the lost one who has sinned and is restored to his Father's love by the end of the parable, let us not discount the older son as a source of food for thought. We begin with the younger son.

The younger son demands his share of the property which will become his. The Father divides his estate and the younger son goes off. He squanders his property in dissolute living, and soon has nothing and is living in poverty.

He finds work, that of pig-keeping, which would not have been glamorous. In a moment of clarity, he realises that he has an option open to him ... return home, apologise to his father for his behaviour, and seek whatever work his father will give him. To his credit, he does not expect to be treated as a son, but hopes to receive the kindness of a man he knows to be decent and to provide well for those who work for him.

He has his words worked out – "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." I can imagine him thinking this over during the journey back to his former home. Yet his Father sees him coming from the distance, recognises him, and rushes to greet him. The Son doesn't even get to finish speaking his piece before the Father interrupts to provide for him and demonstrate his affection for his son. He calls for clothing, footwear and jewellery for his son, and for good food to be prepared for him. This is the moment of reconciliation, and the parallel between the sinner and God is abundantly clear.

So, having witnessed the reconciliation between the father and one son, let us turn to the older son, and explore his place within the parable. There will be another reconciliation.

The younger son was physically distanced from his father, living far away and wasting the resources given to him. Yet the older son feels distanced from his father too, even though he never left. When he hears the music and dancing and celebration, he will not enter the house. His father comes out to speak with him and even begins to plead with him to come in and join the celebration of the household.

The older son feels unappreciated and unrewarded for his work, he complains “for all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends” and feels the treatment of his younger brother, who has squandered the property given to him, is unfair.

From a modern perspective, where we are often taught that parents should not have favourites (or at the least should try not to disclose favouritism to their children), we might feel that the elder son has a valid point. He should be acknowledged for his obedience, his willingness to work, and his commitment to the lands that his father owns and that will one day be his. We might feel that he deserves that young goat that he can host and celebrate with his friends, especially if his father was willing to split the estate at the demand of the younger son.

But the Father speaks comfortingly to the older son, and indicates the depth of his love for him too. He says to his son, “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

By the end of this parable, two sons are reconciled to their father, and understand that they are loved and cherished. Where they go from there, and how the dynamic continues, remains to be seen, but with love underpinning their relationships, they stand on a good foundation.

So, let us rejoice that we are all Prodigal. That’s why Jesus came among us to teach us just how profoundly God loves us. From time to time we all need to be recalled by the God who knows and loves us, and to receive that embrace that signifies our belonging to God and our place within God’s family. When we are aware of that embrace, let us rejoice and delight, and be grateful, and let us reciprocate by being people of love and who are willing to demonstrate that gratitude, each and every day.

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