

## Fourth Sunday in Lent

***“While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.”*** Luke 15, 1-3, 11-32

Today’s gospel story of the Prodigal Son is a salute to parents and the extraordinary love they have for their children, despite the thoughtlessness, ingratitude and waywardness that those very children often display. It’s a story we all know by heart but one from which we can gain new insight if we are prepared to keep on exploring it.

We have all known parents who wait up well beyond their bed time because their teenage son is out with friends. While they know he is reliable and will be home by the midnight deadline they have set, they still wait anxiously to hear the key turn and the front door close. When they greet him, he asks why they have waited up and they provide the lame excuse of wanting to see the end of the movie on TV. But all is well and they go off to bed. Then there are the other parents who wait up not knowing when they will see the return of their daughter who has stormed out in a fit of rage. While they never quite get used to it, they know that this is but another in a succession of storms that disturb the family peace. They put aside their own hurt and disappointment and, yet again, prepare themselves to be welcoming and forgiving once their daughter’s anger has subsided. Then again there are those who wait at home longing for a phone call or a scribbled note from a son or daughter who has walked out and disappeared without trace. They imagine the worst and spend their days between grief and hope, wondering where they went wrong.

In his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, Henri Nouwen describes how he discovered, through reflecting on Rembrandt’s painting of *The Return of the Prodigal*, that God is father and mother to us all. Nouwen goes on to explain how this story from Luke confronts us with the challenge of opening ourselves to accept the love of God: “...truly accepting love, forgiveness and healing is often much harder than giving it. It is the place beyond earning, deserving and rewarding. It is the place of surrender and complete trust.” (Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, New York, Doubleday 1992)

The character who seems to get the least attention in this story is the elder son. However, if we dare look into the mirror, we might find that we look very much like him at times. When was the last time you felt that you had been overlooked or your best efforts gone unnoticed? A little more reflection on the father of this family and his two sons leads to the conclusion that they are not particularly abnormal. Apart from the fact that there is no mention of a mother, the story tells of three characters: a loving father who is quick to forgive a wayward son but slow to affirm the son who was dutiful, a self-centred teenager who squandered his father’s money and lived a life of debauchery and a steady young man who worked hard and supported his broken-hearted father. It is with some justification that the elder son feels overlooked when his father goes overboard at the return of the son who has caused him so much grief. The elder son is the kind of kid that parents can only dream of, and his efforts are passed over without a mention. It’s no wonder that he’s just a little bit peeved. The elder

son is the archetype of all those who are faithful through thick and thin and end up being upstaged by some Johnny-come-lately who comes along and does something spectacular and ends up getting all the credit.

In this particular story, the elder son can't find it within himself to be enthusiastic about his wayward brother's homecoming. Instead, he puts on a fit of petulance and mean-spiritedness. What we see is a clear demonstration of sibling rivalry, the kind of thing that happens in most families and sometimes carries into adulthood. How often do we see it in families when they gather to bury grandma or grandpa? One sibling's children don't get a big enough part in the funeral service and petty jealousies and squabbles come to the surface. And when one or other is overlooked in grandpa's will, family feuds can erupt and even lead to litigation.

The clear message of this story, of course, is that we are all invited to take a leaf out of God's book and demonstrate the generosity of spirit that God extends to everyone, sinner and saint alike. God does not take any one of us for granted or overlook any good that we do. As we continue the Lenten challenge to change our hearts, we might well look to rejoice in the successes and good fortune of family and friends, even in the good things that happen to the black sheep among them.

It's no easy task to be the "father" who loves without condition; it is painfully difficult to face up to our own prodigal-like failings; it is almost unthinkable not to expect from those family members who hurt us some level of apology and accountability. Yet these are the very challenges put to each of us in this fourth week of Lent.