

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Lent (C)

- This poor man had bad luck with both of his sons.
- He loved them both & they both were losers.
- The first was too wild, the second was too rigid & nasty.
- Neither one appreciated their father's love; both tried to exploit him.
- What's more, he knew they were exploiting him.
- This is not a story of a prodigal son, but of an indulgent father, indeed of a hyper-indulgent father.
- In fact, if the word prodigal means *reckless & extravagant*, then while it can be the adjective used to describe the younger son's behaviour with money & property, it can be argued that the story is about the Prodigal Father who seems to be *reckless & extravagant* with his love
- He runs to meet the first son & cuts off his phony speech; he is also incredibly patient with the mean-spirited & ungrateful second son.
- This story is not supposed to provide a model for family life.
- Rather it tells us that God loves us like the indulgent father, so much so that by human standards, we'd say he's a fool.
- I think the story is meant to teach us that human sin can take the form of wild & rebellious behavior or, perhaps more commonly, of sullen, angry & judgmental attitudes.
- The civil law is concerned almost exclusively with rebellious behaviour but, in the parable, it is clear that the sinfulness of the elder son is much more dangerous.
- Those of us who lead quiet & "responsible" lives may very well fall into the trap of sullen, resentful & angry attitudes toward others who seem to be "getting away with murder."
- What we need to ask ourselves is whether we have the kind of love that can understand why others, often less privileged than ourselves, may need both correction & forgiveness.
- When the elder son in the parable says to his father, "your son," (& by implication no brother of mine) has done wrong & should be punished, the father gently corrects him with the words, "Your brother" (& not just my son) "was dead & has come to life again."
- This wayward son has indeed sinned but he has also repented & has paid a price for his sin. Now it is time to rejoice.
- The point is that we dare not ever disown our brothers & sisters, who are all children of God.
- On the contrary, we must love them & rejoice to see them have a chance to have a change of heart & to be brought back to life again - not because we make them change, but because our compassion extended to them liberates them to change.

- And this is true of all sorts of people, including both the marginalised in our society & the criminal serving a long term in prison.
- The story is about good parenting; it is about the parent giving the child a good grounding in moral values in a protected environment but also, when the appropriate time comes, about giving the child the necessary freedom to make their own life choices - And, of course, it is about being there for them, always ready to welcome them back into the family when things go wrong.
- The story is also about being a good child.
- It tells us about the one who went off fooling around doing his own thing & how he came to his senses.
- The important thing that this young man learnt was that there is no shame in returning home.
- He had the courage to make that decision & not to cut himself off from his family even more.
- The older brother also features in the story & there is a lot to be learnt from him.
- Staying at home & being dutiful is one thing, but to do so with a hardness in one's heart is quite another.
- He needed to learn to be unselfish & generous & not to feel that his compliance had somehow earned him credit.
- In some ways this brother, although apparently obedient & dutiful, was actually more selfish than the prodigal son.
- And we might be tempted to judge him more harshly because his selfishness was hidden. The story is, however, primarily about reconciliation.
- It is, after all, a parable of the limitless love God has for us whether we identify with the prodigal son or the selfish older brother.
- God is the very best of parents; he is the very best of fathers & mothers.
- He is constantly there for us; His heart is ever open & full of love.
- He sees all we do & his unseen hand protects us from our worst excesses.
- He gives us all the independence we crave for & need.
- He opens his treasury & gives us more than our share when we want to launch out on our own. And he is there waiting to welcome us into his arms whenever we are ready to return to him.
- To my mind the most beautiful line in the story is the one that says: While he was still a long way off, his father saw him & was moved with pity.
- This describes perfectly the relationship God has with us.
- Even when we are far off he is there waiting for us, waiting to welcome us.
- His heart is moved with pity for the condition we have allowed ourselves to get into.
- He waits with longing for us to return & to experience his forgiveness.
- Put yourself in this scene, be the prodigal child kneeling before God...what do you want to ask - what do you hear?