

4th Sunday of Lent, Year C

GOSPEL

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The tax collectors and the sinners were all seeking the company of Jesus to hear what he had to say, and the Pharisees and the scribes complained. ‘This man’ they said ‘welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he spoke this parable to them:

‘A man had two sons. The younger said to his father, “Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me.” So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

‘When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch, so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled his belly with the husks the pigs were eating but no one offered him anything. Then he came to his senses and said, “How many of my father’s paid servants have more food than they want, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants.” So he left the place and went back to his father.

‘While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. Then his son said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.” And they began to celebrate.

‘Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. “Your brother has come” replied the servant “and your father has killed the calf we had fattened because he has got him back safe and sound.” He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out to plead with him; but he answered his father, “Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property—he and his women—you kill the calf we had been fattening.”

‘The father said, “My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.”

(Luke 15:1–3, 11–32)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The son going to ‘a distant country’ shows that he has turned his back not only on his father but also on his faith. He has left his true heritage behind. His repentance and return becomes all the more poignant.
- Accepting work with pigs shows just how low the son had sunk because pigs are unclean animals to the Jews and touching them rendered the son unclean as well.
- By asking for his inheritance, the son was as good as saying to his father, ‘I wish you were dead.’ This makes the father’s forgiveness all the more astounding.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The religious leaders at the time of Jesus felt that there was no place for sinners in God’s kingdom. This parable shows that there is always hope and a promise of forgiveness for those who repent and turn again to God, and that God never tires of seeking the lost. The father allows his youngest son the freedom to choose his way and make his own mistakes, but he keeps the door of welcome open. Through his journey, this son comes to realise that his fulfillment lies with his father and returns. At this point, the elder son changes places with the younger and becomes the one who is alienated and outside the feast. The reaction of the father is consistent: he goes outside to meet his elder son, now the lost one, to tell him, ‘All I have is yours.’ The reward is for both the righteous and the repentant sinner.

- Do you have a sense of God seeking you out, even in your anger or confusion, and saying to you, ‘All I have is yours’?
- In what ways is the elder son ‘lost’, even though he has lived a model life?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Which of the characters in this story do you identify with the most: the younger son? the father? the older son? How might you react in such circumstances?
- Recall a moment in your life when you experienced something of either the father’s joy at reconciliation, the younger son’s change of heart or the elder son’s jealousy and resentment. Describe this experience for others.
- Reach out to someone with an invitation, a gesture or a word of forgiveness.
- This line from the gospel is particularly apt during Lent, the time of repentance. Use it often this week:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. Forgive me.

