

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 who travelled to ‘a distant country’ has turned his back on both his father and his faith, and he has left his true heritage behind. His repentance and return are all the more poignant, given this context.
- Accepting work that involved pigs shows just how low the son had sunk. The Jews consider pigs to be unclean animals, and touching them rendered the son unclean as well.
- The son asking for his inheritance essentially conveyed ‘I wish you were dead’ to the father. This makes the father’s forgiveness all the more astounding.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The religious leaders during Jesus’ time felt that sinners had no place in God’s kingdom. This parable proves that there is always hope and forgiveness for those who repent and turn again to God—and that God never tires of seeking the lost. The father in the parable allows his youngest son to choose his own way and make his own mistakes; however, he keeps the door of welcome open. In his journey, the son comes to realise that his fulfilment lies with his father and returns. At this point, the elder son exchanges places with the younger son, becoming alienated and excluded from the feast. The father’s reaction 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 thus intended for both the righteous and the repentant sinner.

- Have you ever felt that God has sought you out, even in your anger or confusion, and said 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 character in this story do you identify with the most: the younger son, father or older son? How might you react in such circumstances?
- Recall a moment in your life when you experienced feeling the father’s joy at reconciliation, the younger son’s change of heart or the elder son’s jealousy and resentment. Describe this experience to 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.

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God’s word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

In this parable, both sons became unhappy because they ultimately distanced themselves from their father. The Church considers this distancing from God a sin:

Sin is an offence against reason, truth and right conscience; it is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbour ... It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity.

(CCC, §1849)

- Explore various understandings of sin, especially as the choice to turn away from God.

Sin is a personal act ... Sin gives rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to divine goodness.

(CCC, §§1868, 1869).

- Discuss these two forms of sin: personal and communal or social. How does personal sin give rise to social sin? How are they connected?
- Discuss some examples of social sin.
- Discuss the opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation that will be available to the elect after their baptism or reception.
- Are the elect familiar with the rite of reconciliation?

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

God’s abundance is again portrayed through the image of a great feast—in which the kingdom of heaven is open to both the righteous and the sinner who repents. God’s boundless forgiveness and loving welcome of the penitent form the core of this parable.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- What opportunities does your community provide during Lent for examination of conscience, recognition of sin (both personal and social) and forgiveness and reconciliation? Can the elect become involved in these opportunities?
- Contemplate God’s mercy and gracious forgiveness during this week’s prayer. Use adaptations of the intercessions for the elect from the Second Scrutiny in the RCIA at §154. A suitable song could be Be Still and Know (GA 401).

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