

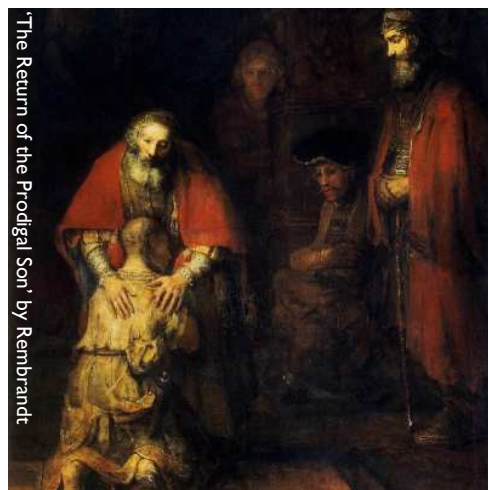
Keeping Lent with Saint Luke:

The prodigal son and his jealous brother

Jack Mahoney SJ

Jack Mahoney SJ continues to explore the ways in which Jesus teaches about God's forgiveness in Saint Luke's Gospel, from which our Sunday gospel readings for this Lent are taken. In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus illustrates to his listeners the joy of forgiveness, both on the part of the penitent sinner and of God. But do we not feel a sneaking sympathy for the faithful and jealous elder brother?

The passage chosen from St Luke's Gospel for the Mass of the Fourth Sunday in Lent (Lk 15:11-32) is probably the most famous of the parables told by Jesus: the parable of the Prodigal Son. The famous picture of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (shown here), painted (c.1669) by Rembrandt in his old age, captures the raggedly dressed son, on his knees in repentance, being embraced tenderly by his aged and richly dressed father. The striking play of light, typical of Rembrandt, shows father and son united in a shared private moment against a sombre background, while the solemnity of the occasion is marked by the serious expressions of the silent onlookers.



Mounting alarm

The growing popularity of Jesus among the 'tax collectors and sinners', that is, the rejected and despised members of Israelite society who welcomed his message and were all coming to listen to him (Lk 15:1), was beginning to alarm the religious establishment of scribes and Pharisees, and Luke reports how they were grumbling at Jesus and accusing him of welcoming sinners into his company and even demeaning himself by eating with them (15:2). Luke elsewhere, in 19:1-10, gives us a delightful account of how Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in Jericho,

clambered up a sycamore tree because of his small stature and his curiosity to catch a glimpse of Jesus passing by, and how he was thrilled – and converted – when Jesus invited himself to spend the day at Zacchaeus's house.

On this occasion, Luke shows us Jesus responding to his critics when 'he told them this parable' (15:3), but Luke also slips in two more, each of the three parables in its own way illustrating

the simple joy at recovering something valuable which had been lost. The first parable tells of a shepherd who lost one of his sheep and who left his ninety-nine others 'in the wilderness' (15:4) to go and search for the lost one. When he finds it he puts it on his shoulder and carries it back home, inviting his friends and neighbours to rejoice with him in the recovery of his lost sheep. Jesus's message was that there is 'more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance' (15:7), the latter group possibly referring to Jesus's self-righteous critics. In the catacomb of Callixtus in Rome there is a third century fresco of Jesus, showing him as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11) carrying a sheep on his shoulder, based partly on this parable, which occurs also in Mt 18:12-14, and which both Matthew and Luke derived from their common source, 'Q'.

The second parable of rejoicing at recovering something lost is typical of Luke in that he introduces a woman this time, one with the domestic crisis of having lost a valuable coin, who searches high and low all over the house until eventually she finds it (15:8). Then she calls in her friends and neighbours to share her relief and rejoicing. On her triumph Jesus comments: 'Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents' (15:9-10).

The lost son

The scene is now set in Luke's Gospel for this Sunday's Mass reading, the more detailed parable about 'the prodigal son', the term 'prodigal,' meaning extravagant, having been first used by the Latin Vulgate Bible (*prodigus*) to describe the story, although the German version is more accurate in calling it the parable of the lost son. It begins with Jesus explaining 'there was a man who had two sons' (15:11), a statement which, many commentators observe, would immediately call to mind among his Jewish listeners the famous two sons of Isaac, Esau and his younger brother Jacob, the revered ancestor of their people (Gen 25: 25-26; 28:10-14). If so, they were about to be upset rapidly, because Jesus went on to describe how the younger son went wrong, perhaps hinting at Israel's own historical desertion of God. The young man coolly demanded from his father here and now the portion of the family property which he would eventually inherit when his father died; he then converted it all to cash and soon afterwards he went off to another country to 'squander his property in dissolute living' (15:12-13). Jesus's listeners might well have been reminded at this stage of the telling verse of Proverbs 29:3, 'A child who loves wisdom makes a parent glad, but to keep company with prostitutes is to squander one's substance.'

Inevitably the extravagant young man eventually ran out of funds; and his fortunes fell even lower when a famine broke out where he was, and he had to hire himself out to a Gentile for a job. He was given the most degrading task a Jew could have, that of feeding pigs (Lev 11:7), and was evidently underpaid, because he became so hungry that he was even reduced to wanting to share the pigs' food; 'but no one gave him anything' (15:14-16). It was at this lowest ebb, the parable recounts, that the wastethrift 'came to

himself', realising that even his father's hirelings were far better off than he was. He decided therefore to go back home, to apologise to his father as no longer deserving to be called his son, and to ask his father for a job as one of his hired hands (15:17-19).

No sooner had his father had the first glimpse of his younger son returning famished and in rags than he rushed out to meet him, 'filled with compassion,' and embraced and kissed him. He would not even allow his son to finish making the apology which he had been rehearsing, but started reinstating him immediately, ordering his slaves to get him something to wear – 'the best robe' – and a ring to show his status and decent sandals as befitted a free man. And they were to slaughter the fatted calf which was kept for special occasions. 'For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found' (15:20-24). And the feasting for his return began.

The jealous brother

That was not the end of the story, however. The elder brother, who so far had been in the background, now emerged into the action. He had been out in the fields working hard for his father as usual, and as he was returning home he was surprised to hear all the commotion and rejoicing in the house. When he asked a slave what was going on, he was told that his brother had suddenly turned up and his father had killed the fatted calf for them all to celebrate. The brother's anger appears to have boiled over. He had probably for years been jealous of his younger brother as their father's favourite, spoiled and indulged as younger siblings can be, and he had deeply resented the father's yielding to the whim of his young brother to go his own way, taking his share of the family's substance and abandoning all feeling of responsibility to their father or the family or the inheritance. After squandering his share of the family property in riotous living, now the spendthrift had come back penniless, and their father and the family were actually celebrating his return! And who was going to pay for all this?

When the father then came out to plead with his elder son to come into the house and join in the welcoming of his brother, all this resentment burst out. *He* had given all his energy and time to working for his father for years like a slave; *he* had always done whatever his

father wanted; *he* had never been given by his father even a young goat to celebrate with his friends. But now, he adds contemptuously, ‘this son of yours’ comes back after wasting ‘all *your* property’ with loose women – and you kill the fatted calf for him! (15:28-29) In the face of such powerful resentment and recrimination the unhappy father attempts to explain to his elder son that they are always together and the son is owner of all that the father has. ‘But’, he protests, ‘we *had* to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours [a gentle correction and appeal] was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found’ (15:31-32).

It would be difficult for Jesus’s opponents among the scribes and Pharisees not to realise that they were being criticised in the person of the elder jealous brother who represented them in their resentment of all the sinners they complained that Jesus was making so much of; just as later it would be difficult for Christian readers not to appreciate that if they resented the Church giving forgiveness to converts from paganism or penitent sinners at Easter, they too were taking the part of the vindictive elder brother. It is the father, of course, who is the central figure of the whole parable, flanked on either side by his two sons, the extravagant and the resentful; and the central message of this parable of the lost son returning to his father’s embrace in spite of his brother’s jealousy, like the parable of the wandering sheep brought home in the shepherd’s arms and the parable of the housewife’s relief at finding her missing money, is that God’s joy is indescribable when sinners return to him. As Jesus declared to his critics, expressing his own feelings too, ‘Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance’ (15:7) There is another significant passage earlier in Luke’s Gospel which describes how Jesus actually called one of the detested tax collectors, Levi, to join his close band of disciples, and Levi put on a special dinner in his house for Jesus and all his colleagues and their friends. Then, when the scribes and Pharisees put their usual complaints to Jesus’s disciples about his eating and drinking with tax-collectors and sinners, it was Jesus himself who retorted: ‘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’ (5:27-32).

Does this mean that God loves sinners more than the righteous, the obedient, the God-fearing? We might feel there could be a touch here of the so-called ‘mystique of sin’ which has occasionally been alleged of writers like François Mauriac and Graham Greene, who in their novels seemed to be fascinated by the mystery and almost the glamour of sin as somehow enhancing or magnifying the mercy and the grace of God. Saint Paul showed himself aware in his letter to the Romans of the slander directed against him, that he was advocating that people should sin more so that God would then show more forgiveness (Rom 3:8): as he put it, ‘should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound?’ (Rom 6:1). Sometimes, perhaps, the effects of God’s love in the lives of some individuals may be more spectacular than in the more humdrum lives of others, as was the case with Paul himself, and with Mary Magdalene, the woman from whom, according to Luke, ‘seven devils had gone out’ (8:2).

However, this scarcely implies that God loves such people more than he loves others, although perhaps one aspect of God’s love is more evident or more dramatic in some cases than in others. The parable of the shepherd (15:3-6) who abandons the rest of his flock in the wilderness in order to look for one sheep that has got itself lost may be considered (as I wrote last year in [Thinking Faith](#)) behaviour verging on recklessness; but the point is that Jesus’s comparison of God with such a shepherd shows vividly to what lengths God is prepared to go to save individuals. In the case of the returning son perhaps we may be also tempted to ask: can his father be too indulgent, too ready to forgive? Sometimes, I admit, I do wonder a little sceptically about the prodigal son, and have a slight sympathy for his older brother. Why did the playboy really come back? Was it because of his need, or his failure, rather than his genuine repentance? Was he more sorry for himself than for what he had done? I sometimes fantasise about making a short film entitled ‘The Prodigal Son: The Day After’. The next morning, was he up and about early, looking for work to do and eager to show his father – and his elder brother – that he really was sorry and that things were going to be different from now on? Again, while in the world of moral fantasy, I sometimes wonder what his mother made of it all. There is no mention of her, of course; but Robert Frost has a wonderful poem entitled ‘A Masque of Reason’,

which contains remarks offered to Job and God and the Devil by Mrs Job reflecting sensibly on the situation affecting her husband. It would be intriguing to hear what the prodigal's mother might think of her son taking regular advantage of his indulgent father!

Rejoice, Jerusalem!

The Gospel equivalent of this mental wondering about how sincere the remorse of the returning prodigal was, is the warning of Jesus in Mt 7:21 that 'not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven.' After his elaborate apology had been brushed aside and his return had been duly celebrated, we may say, the ball is now in the prodigal son's court to prove that he really meant to mend his ways. That is not always as easy as it sounds, however, as we can sense in the conversation described between the risen Christ and Peter on the seashore in chapter 21 of John's Gospel. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, echoing Peter's triple denial of Jesus at his trial (Lk 22:61), and in his third reply Peter seems almost in despair at trying to convince Jesus that he really does love him: 'Lord, you know everything; you *know* that I love you' (Jn 21:17).

In trying to understand the motive of the prodigal son we may be helped by St Ignatius Loyola who ends his *Spiritual Exercises* by exploring what genuine love is like. As he observes at the very start of his analysis, 'love should be shown more in deeds than in words.' Luke was aware of this in reporting in the Acts Paul's

preaching to all who would listen, 'that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance' (Acts 26:20). The acid test of real repentance, then, is the willingness to show it in one's behaviour, an attitude which traditional moral theology has called 'a firm purpose of amendment.' That is on the son, or the penitent's, side. What we cannot detract from is the eager willingness on the father's side, that is, God's side, to go the extra mile to forgive, responding generously to the slightest hint of repentance.

It is interesting that this Fourth Sunday of Lent is also known as 'Rejoicing Sunday', or *Laetare* Sunday, with the introductory verse of the Mass being taken from Isaiah 66:10-11, exhorting us: 'Rejoice, Jerusalem! [addressing the Church] Be glad for her'. The Mass is celebrating the joy of forgiveness at this stage of Lent, both the joy of God in forgiving those who return to him in repentance, and the joy of those who are forgiven unconditionally by a loving and understanding God. It is not just a happy coincidence that the Gospel for Rejoicing Sunday presents us with the major parable Jesus told to illustrate the rejoicing in heaven whenever anyone who has been lost is found.

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