

4th Sunday in Lent (C)

Recent surveys have shown that atheism is on the increase. I would say that many people who have forsaken religion may have grown up with an image of God somewhat removed from that of the Father figure in today's gospel. God has sometimes been presented as inaccessible or remote, a stern ruler of the Universe, difficult to please - a 'never off duty policeman' type. Often these caricatures of God are carried over into adulthood and hard to shake off.

The Father in the story is so happy to see his son back home that he forgets all the heartache he's caused. All the prodigal had to do was to swallow his pride and return. That's the bit that we have to do as well. The prodigal son could have stayed wallowing in his misery, and miss out on the Father's forgiveness. I would say that souls in Purgatory are filled with terrible regrets at passing up opportunities for putting things right with God and their neighbour while in this present world. That's their purgatorial pain.

There is a story told about this visionary who claimed he was having visions of Our Lord. His bishop asked to see him. He told him that the next time 'his' Jesus appears he was to ask him if he remembered any of the bishop's confessed sins – not name them. Reluctantly the man agreed to this rather peculiar request. When the figure appeared again the seer asked him if he could recall any the bishop's confessed sins, to which the figure replied that, try as he might, he had completely forgotten them. That was proof enough for the bishop that the vision was indeed genuine.

Because when God forgives He suffers from total amnesia. The psalmist put it like this "as far as the East is from the West, so far does he remove our transgressions". What about us? When we bury the hatchet are we tempted to mark the spot? There is only one thing which ties our heavenly father's hands in

dispensing mercy - that is our hesitancy to forgive others from the heart.

However the elder son in the story doesn't come across in a very good light - does he? This part of the story is added because the smug Pharisees couldn't 'stomach' to see Jesus fraternising with certain undesirables. The disgruntled elder brother stands for them. But Jesus puts them in their place when he says: "it is not the healthy who need the doctor but the sick".

The first lesson we can learn from today's story is that we should put aside the idea of earning God's love. We don't want to end up like the sullen elder brother. Earned or conditional love is a contradiction in terms. Babies, for instance, are loved for their own sake because of their littleness and total dependence on us - if only we were the same towards God our Father. The father loved the elder brother no less than the prodigal. He reassures him all he owns would be his one day.

The second lesson we can learn is that if we are humble enough to turn to God, there is no sin which is beyond the pale of his mercy, howsoever great.

I suppose, come to think of it, there is a bit of the prodigal and elder brother in all of us. The only thing which is constant is the Father's mercy which is freely given to those who desire it.