

Lent 4C

People pick up different images of God as they grow up. Some may have stored in their memory an image of God somewhat removed from that of the Father figure in today's story. He has sometimes been presented as inaccessible or remote, difficult to please, a strict disciplinarian, a 'never off duty policeman'. Often these caricatures of God stay with a person and shake their faith.

The Father in the story is 'over the moon' to see his son back home. He is so moved with pity that he puts to one side all the heartache his son has caused. All the prodigal did was swallow his pride, return to his father and own up to what he did wrong. That's the bit that we have to do as well. This errant son could have stayed where he was, floundering in his misery and miss out on the Father's joy and forgiveness. I would say that the greatest pain of the souls in Purgatory comes from missed opportunities whilst in this world to put things right with God and neighbour.

When God forgives He doesn't do it in halves. 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? Unlike the Father in the story who ran to embrace his son, do we keep certain people at a distance? In the Our Father we say: 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. As far as reconciliation with certain disagreeable people is concerned, I think the main thing is to keep the lines of communication open and not pull up the drawbridge. That may be the sum total of what we can do in certain sticky situations.

Compared to the prodigal, the elder son in the story doesn't come across in a very good light, even though he never left home. This part of the story is added because the complacent Pharisees couldn't 'stomach' to see Jesus fraternising with certain undesirable types. The disgruntled joyless elder brother

stands for them. But Jesus's puts them in their place when he says: "it is not the healthy who need the doctor but the sick". We know that society demands that serious offenders be sent to prison but the story of the prodigal, who was reinstated as a son, challenges us as Christians to help reinstate offenders back into society whilst at the same time not trivialising the misery they've caused others. We should also not let slip opportunities to reinstate people who have let themselves and society down in other ways and want to make a fresh start.

One of the lessons from today's story is that we should put aside the idea of earning God's love. Earned love is a contradiction in terms. We don't want to end up like the sullen elder brother who was very unforgiving towards his errant sibling. We need to be loved for whom we are and not forever branded by the mistakes of the past. The father loved the elder brother no less than the prodigal. He reassures him that all he owns would one day be his.

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.