

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 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, not for the better might I add.

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 seek forgiveness. That's the bit that we have to do as well. This errant son could have stayed where he was, wallowing in his misery and miss out on his father's love and welcome.

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 sins". When we show a willingness to put past failures behind us God will give us every help to live more virtuous lives like he did the prodigal son. But we can also be God's instrument in helping others to turn their lives round as well. St John Henry Newman said: 'to live is to change and to live well is to have changed often'. To help others bring about that change is truly a Christ-like act.

Compared to the prodigal, the elder son in the story has his own problems, even though on the surface he looked the genuine article. This part of the story is added because the self-righteous Pharisees had little or no time for anyone who took a wrong turning in life regardless of whether they came back on track or not. The sullen elder brother stands for them. But the Pharisees complacent views doesn't sit easily with those of Jesus who insists that "it is not the healthy who need the doctor but the sick". We know that people who seriously

flout the law of the land often 'do time' but those who break the moral law can also feel that same sense of estrangement. The story of the prodigal challenges us as Christians to make the most of a person's willingness to 'turn the corner'. The father in the story gives his errant son every enticement to do so.

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 misbehaving sibling despite the fact that he'd left his wayward life behind him. 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. Everything the father has 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 earnestly seek it.