

Homily. 4th Sunday in Lent. Year.C. 30/31 March 2019.

By all accounts the family we've just heard about in the gospel parable would these days be described as conflicted, dysfunctional, stressed out and badly in need of intervention, or something along those lines. Just look and listen to the story as Jesus told it. First up, there's no mention of the mother at all. Had she died, run off (who could really blame her), perhaps she'd passed away, or maybe she was quietly doing her best to keep the whole family together? We simply aren't told.

Remembering that He was addressing an equally conflicted audience of tax collectors and well known public sinners, along with a group of righteous, pious and law abiding pharisees and scribes, Jesus chose to focus His story on the relationship between the father and his two boys. It's easy enough to grasp that the younger son stands in for the sinners' side and the elder for the righteous, with neither faction being the equal of the father in the slightest.

Both sons had their own agendas; the younger boy, full of selfishness and impetuosity, didn't care who he hurt or what havoc he caused as long as he got his own way. Meanwhile, the elder son was a simmering cauldron of anger and resentment, believing that he was entitled to all he wanted while looking down on his brother's waywardness. The two lads were united though in their complete lack of love for each other and for wellbeing of the family and in their absolute misunderstanding of and disrespect for the father.

It's very clear that God is that Father, so our main focus should be on Him. What then do we see and hear then when we turn to the Father? A generosity that is truly prodigal, lavish and perfect! He let the younger boy do as he wished, respecting his choices even though they were wrong, causing much pain. As we heard, He also assured His elder son that everything He had was already his, without any need to ask for or earn such blessings. What Jesus reveals to us is a Father standing as a bridge of mercy between His two warring sons, ever on the lookout for them, throwing parties when they come back home and inviting all to come in and share the feast.

It's this watching, longing Father who draws our attention. Night and day He stood silently, at His door and out in His fields, waiting for His lost son to come to his senses and return home. At the same time He noticed all of His eldest son's good work offering everything to him without asking for anything in return. Neither son and neither side in this family at war grasped this point, and nor do we!

Both aspects of these two boys are at work in us. Sometimes we're doing all of the good work we think God wants of us. At other times we are all for pleasing ourselves, tossing care and consequences to the winds. What the Father is hoping for from us is generous and compassionate hearts like His leading to an honest understanding and acceptance of our strengths and weaknesses, and those of others.

If the younger son had this he wouldn't have demanded his share of the inheritance and then run off blowing it all so stupidly away. If the elder son

had this he could have relaxed about himself and others, realising that in this messy family we're all in it together, for better and for worse.

We don't know if the elder son ever let himself come into the feast of joy and life for his brother's return. All we can do is hope that he, too, did come to his senses. Moreover, when we notice that we're acting like he did, full of self-righteous pride and judgement, we can choose to focus on the Father and walk across His bridge of loving tenderness into the party. We also don't know if the younger son ever settled down completely? Perhaps, after recovering, he slipped off the rails again going on another self-centred bender?

What we do know for certain is that the Father was always looking out for both of them, offering them a warm hug and a welcome home party, no matter what. This is our God, always and ever. The more we focus on this Father of ours the more like Him we'll become, which is what this season of Lent is all about.