

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 – things to notice

- This story is part of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (from 9:51 to 19:28 see 4. above).
- This story is only found in Luke.
- One of a group of 3 parables in Luke about forgiveness – the other 2 are: the lost sheep & the lost coin. This parable is the 3<sup>rd</sup> and most dramatic in the group.
- The reason the parables are told is because of the complaint of the Pharisees and the scribes that Jesus **welcomes** sinners and **eats** with them.
- Note: the tax collectors and sinners are all seeking the company of Jesus to hear what he had to say – contrast with the scribes and Pharisees who don't seem to be seeking Jesus' company nor prepared to hear what he had to say. Rather than listening to Jesus, they pronounce judgement.
- "Sinners" were generally considered by Scribes and Pharisees to be those who could not keep ritual purity and other ceremonial laws. Often this was because of their occupation. In general, anyone dealing with blood or animals was part of this group (including physicians – Luke himself).
- Eating with sinners – sharing food with the unclean – was a horrifying thought for the Scribes & Pharisees.
- A parable about 2 sons and their father – notice the absence of the mother.
- Fits with other biblical stories about 2 sons (Cain & Abel, Esau & Jacob, Joseph & his brothers) – often stories in which the younger brother triumphs over the older.
- Story is full of **utterly amazing elements**:
  1. Younger son does the **unthinkable** and asks for his share of the estate before his father has died (very bold)!
  2. Customary arrangements dictated that the first-born male would inherit 2/3rds of his father's estate and the younger son 1/3<sup>rd</sup>.
  3. Amazingly, the father gives it to him!
  4. More amazingly, the father actually gives the younger son **a half, (not 1/3<sup>rd</sup>)**, of the estate!
  5. The son is eventually reduced to feeding pigs – utterly unthinkable for Jews – in other words, the son has become a Gentile, a non-believer!
  6. The son **comes to his senses** and decides to **return** (repentance) home to ask for forgiveness. He does not seek to be treated like a son again, but hopes only to be treated like a servant in his father's household.
  7. **Father** sees him coming – he is on the 'look out' for him & acts like you would expect the mother to act! You can almost see him waiting at the gate.
  8. Father **runs** to meet him – worthy oriental gentlemen of the 1<sup>st</sup> century did not run anywhere – it was considered undignified!
  9. Father **embraces** the son and **kisses him** – unheard-of behaviour in public!
  10. Son blurts out his 'confession' and his plea to be a servant
  11. Father **completely ignores** the son's apology and request! He does not castigate or lecture the son.
  12. Rather, the father **immediately restores** to the son all the signs of sonship: the robe the ring, the sandals. None of these things were normally worn by slaves or even paid servants. *The Father is restoring the son to his rightful place in the family in spite of what the son has done. He takes the son as he finds him: half-naked, smelly and dirty from the journey. He does not wait for him to be cleaned up before putting the robe on him.*
  13. Even more, the father **orders a feast** to celebrate his return – rather than ordering punishment for his 'sin'! They will feast on meat – only done on the most sacred or special occasions!

14. Elder son (also) **comes home** (from work in the fields), is angry and refuses to go in. Now, it seems, the elder son has been displaced by the younger, but the Father goes out to plead with him.
  15. He says to his father: "This **son of yours...**" – not "my brother". The older brother will not acknowledge or accept his brother back, that is, he does not imitate the father's generosity and forgiveness.
  16. "**He and his women**" – first mention of the younger son coming home with a retinue of women. Who are they? Why are they in the story?
  17. The **older son's complaint** explains his feelings and his anger: the father has treated the younger son too generously when, in fact, the older son is more entitled to the father's generosity.
  18. Father's reply: **reassurance** of the place of the older son and his entitlement ("All I have is yours") but says it is only right to celebrate "**your brother's**" safe return – he was **dead** and has come to **life**, was **lost** and is **found**.
- Note: we don't hear the end of the story which leaves us with questions.
  - The older son does not appear to lose out, for he, too, is invited to the feast and the father tries very hard to reconcile him to his brother.
  - We are left with the question: will righteous people enter the banquet hall to make merry with sinners and the God who delights in their company?

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

Temptation, Transfiguration, Repentance & Forgiveness & Lent (2)

Note that this Sunday is known as Laetare Sunday – from the opening words of the Entrance Antiphon for this Sunday: "Rejoice, Jerusalem"

This 'rejoicing' Sunday marks the turning point in the Lenten Season. The rose-coloured vestments and cloths stand in joyful contrast to the more sombre purple. The prayers and readings look more strongly towards the celebration of healing and new life at Easter.

In this year's cycle of readings (Year C), the Gospel for this 'turning point' Sunday is a parable of *lavish and unexpected* forgiveness. It is one of three parables in which God's mercy breaks through all human restrictions and religious of how God *should* act toward sinners.

Note the first reading – Passover celebration upon arriving in the Promised Land. Passover – a feast to commemorate God's *saving action* for Israel. The Gospel parable also ends with a feast.

Note the response to the psalm: Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Note the references in the scriptures to meals and banquets, especially the messianic banquet at the end of time.

Note the references to Jesus' meals with tax collectors and sinners in this Gospel. In fact, one of Luke's unique emphases is Jesus table-fellowship with all sorts of people and especially with sinner.

If we take the Gospels of the first two Sundays (temptation and transfiguration) as a parable about Christian life (a journey out of and away from temptation and into being transfigured by God's grace), the Gospels of repentance and forgiveness on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Sundays give us the 'road map'. We make the journey from temptation to transfiguration through repentance and by opening ourselves to God's mercy and forgiveness.

These Gospels help answer the question: how will God act towards us if we stumble and fall? They reassure us of God's mercy and forgiveness. The parable of the forgiving father expresses God's extraordinary and excessive kindness, patience, affection (love) and forgiveness.

The true disciple already knows that Christian life is a continual act of turning more and more towards God. At every moment of our turning we are accompanied by God's tender, nurturing and lavish forgiveness and love.

The parable reveals an image of a God who is not interested in punishment and vengeance; who deals with us generously; who patiently hopes for our return and welcomes us joyfully when we come, and loses no time restoring us to our rightful place as beloved sons and daughters.

God's mercy is indeed as foolish as a shepherd who abandons ninety-nine sheep to save one, as a woman who turns her house upside down to recover a paltry sum, and as a Jewish father who joyfully welcomes home his wastrel son who has become a Gentile.

"Because disciples have such a merciful God, they can embark trustingly and joyfully on Jesus' way to this God." (New Jerome Biblical Commentary)

The message today is: Rejoice in God's abiding mercy!

## Reflection 2

This Sunday's Gospel is a parable of lavish and unexpected forgiveness and reconciliation. It is one of three parables in which God's mercy breaks through all human and religious restrictions about how God should act toward sinners.

A wealthy father has two sons. Very cheekily, the younger son asks for his share of the estate which would come to him on his father's death. This is a young man who has places to go and things to see!

Remarkably, the father gives him half of his estate, not the one-third to which the son was entitled. No wonder the older son is put out. The younger son goes off and has a great time until the money runs out. Financially ruined he has to earn his keep feeding pigs. He decides to return home, beg forgiveness and ask to be only a servant in his father's household.

The father is anxiously waiting for the son when he returns. He runs to embrace him. The son begins his confession, but the father takes no notice. He does not chastise or lecture. He refuses to treat his son as a servant and immediately sets about restoring him to his rightful place in the household with the ring, the robe and sandals. He orders a feast to celebrate the fact that his son is alive and has returned. No wonder the older son is angry and resentful. But the father sets about reassuring him that his place in the household and in the father's affection is secure and urging him to be reconciled with his brother. We are left wondering about what eventually happened.

The Gospel offers not just the hope of God's forgiveness but the certainty of it.

The message today is: Rejoice in God's abiding mercy!