

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
11th September 2022 - 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year C): 1st: Exodus 32:7-11,13-14. Psalm: Psalm 50:3-4,12-13,17,19. 2nd: 1 Timothy 1:12-17.

Gospel: Luke 15:1-32.

If ever there was a story that speaks to people of all times and conditions, backgrounds and upbringing, today's parable is certainly one of them. All of us one way or another can see ourselves in the role of one or other of the three main characters, and perhaps during our lifetime changing roles.

We label it the parable of 'The Prodigal Son'. The label is misleading. The key person in the story is the **father**, not the sons; and the elder brother as well as the younger is essential to the story. Be that as it may, look at the story in terms of the **responses**: and especially of the father.

The **response** of the younger son to his home situation and the desire to leave home for the wider world outside, hence his demand for his inheritance.

The **response** of the father to the younger son's request – his willingness to let him go; presumably with great regret, and knowing what his son was likely to do with it, he still divided his living freely and generously. He valued his son's freedom to think and choose for himself, to obey or disobey; to use and abuse his inheritance as he saw fit. When the younger son was in the far country, living wildly and wantonly what was the father doing? We can presume that he was devotedly praying for him; going out each day, scanning the horizon to watch and hope for his safe return.

The **response** of the younger son to the actual experience of poverty to which he was reduced as a result of squandering his patrimony – that marvellous phrase- '**then he came to his senses.**'

The **response** of the father to the returning son; arms and all open in welcome

The **response** of the elder brother to the way the father had responded to the returning younger son; the **response** of the father to his elder son's behaviour.

The elder sons' response to the father's welcome to the returning boy is understandable. Both sons in their different ways acted immaturely.

The only one of the three who was fully in control was the father. The pain he personally suffered became in him the power of a love that reconciled. The father in this story is to be understood by us as an image of God, an expression in human terms of that Divine Other to whom Jesus prayed and taught us to pray; addressing God as Our Father. What love of the Father, to let someone go but keep hold of the burden on your heart! And then rejoice unashamedly at his return and to allow no recriminations or guilt.

Jesus' intention is that we would learn of the Father's long-suffering love for all of us from this story. He is more interested in us than in our behaviour, rejoices over us when we return to him, and grieves for our sakes when our ways lead us into harm or danger.

We should be encouraged by this. We all have a Father waiting for our return. Not to judge but to rejoice; not to burden us with guilt, but waiting to forgive and shower us with good things.

Can we recognise something of ourselves in the elder son's **responses**? The tendency to congratulate ourselves and to make comparisons with others who seem more wayward is not far from any of us. He was living in the father's house and serving him energetically, but he wasn't close to him.

His heart was tainted with resentment, particularly towards his brother, and he allowed this to boil up into anger directed at his father. We all need to be aware of that within us.

But you and I are made in the image of God, and the whole point of our faith is that we shall cooperate with God in allowing his Godlikeness to find expression in the way we live, the way we are with ourselves, and the way we **respond** to others.