

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON (Laetare Sunday, Year C)

Today's gospel of the Prodigal Son is surely the single best-known and most loved of our Savior's parables, for it speaks most beautifully of the mercy and free grace of God.

First, let us look at the common name given to it: the Parable of the Prodigal Son. First, what does "prodigal" mean? Well, it means "extravagant" and lavish, even outrageously so. The son in the parable is certainly that; but his father is *even more* prodigal in the extravagant welcome that he extends to his wastrel son who has squandered everything and then comes home penniless. So this could well be called the Parable of the Prodigal Father—or, perhaps better yet, the Parable of the Two Prodigals. This is indeed a parable of grace, but it is not about grace that comes easily or cheaply: the son pays dearly for his sins, and the father pays dearly for his love. No, there is no cheap grace or easy mercy in this parable!

The parable of the Prodigal Son is actually about *costly* grace of God's Kingdom, bought at the price of our Savior's Blood. We are missing much of our Lord's meaning if we do not see that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is actually a veiled re-telling of Israel's history. Remember the pattern of Israel's history: original holiness, followed by sin and exile, and then by the return of a purified Israel to new life in the Promised Land. Thus the younger son in the parable represents Israel, God's holy people. The son starts out in a state of holiness in his father's house; then he desires his independence and tells his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me" (Lk 15.12). For the son to say that was more than ingratitude: it amounted very nearly to saying, "*I wish you were dead* and out of the way, so that I can enjoy life and be free from you at last." And, indeed, there is a major strand of modern thought that has proclaimed the so-called "death of God" precisely as the precondition for humanity's true liberation.

But our parable tells us that the son's sense of liberation is short-lived: the wealth is soon squandered in loose living and ends in degrading servitude, feeding swine in the land of exile, and being left at the mercy of a harsh master. This, too, is an image of Israel's history: having sinned against the Covenant, Israel goes into exile. There, first in Egypt and then in Babylon, Israel must live in servitude to Gentile tyrants, symbolized by the uncleanness of tending swine and of envying even the inedible feed given to the pigs. No more terrible portrayal of spiritual bondage and sorrow could be given to a Jewish audience.

Then the son comes to himself, recovers his true sense of who he is, as well as of the transgression he has committed, and says, "I will arise, and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants'" (Lk 15.18-19). This, too, is an image of Israel—an Israel penitent and humbled and willing to return to the Lord, at any price.

Then there is the homecoming, when the father anticipates the son's return by running to meet him. The father replies to his son's confession by saying, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Lk 15.23-34). Now the Greek text speaks literally of the *first* robe, which can rightly be understood as the finest one; but it can also mean the *original* robe in which the son was clothed. Restored Israel is clothed in *original holiness* once more, the holiness that was theirs at Mt.

Sinai. The gift of the *ring* symbolizes the father now freely vesting his penitent son with the father's authority. In those days, it was the signet ring with its seal that guaranteed the authority of a document. If a king gave his ring to his chief minister, it meant entrusting him with the authority to rule in the king's name, as his representative. Thus a renewed Israel is restored to the state of grace, as God's holy and priestly people. But before the feast of rejoicing begins, there must be the slaughter of a *fatted calf*; to Jewish hearers, this is suggestive of sacrifice (cf Judges 6.28): for the feast of reconciliation comes at the price of sacrifice, of the offering of a sacrificial victim.

Jesus' hearers, listening to his parable of the Prodigal Son, would have recalled the words of Hosea, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, | and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11.1; cf Mt 2.15). The parable is about Israel's exile and restoration, the defining pattern of the entire Bible. After all, the Jews' forefather Jacob (also called Israel) was the *younger son* and had his own experience of exile and return, both early and late in life, due to his interactions with his father and his elder brother and his sons. So, in many ways, this was familiar territory for Jesus' hearers.

But then what was the *strange and shocking* aspect of the parable? Was it the emphasis on the mercy of God to the penitent? Not really. Jews already believed in God's mercy, as is evident from every page of the Bible and every stage of Jewish history. The shocking part is Jesus' evident claim that the definitive restoration of Israel—and therefore of all mankind—is taking place in the person of Jesus Christ himself. The prodigal son represents Israel exiled from the Holy Land *but also all humanity*, exiled from Paradise after original sin. Jesus is the New Adam, and therefore includes all prodigal sinful humanity in himself. Jesus is the New Moses, and therefore re-constitutes holy Israel in his own person. His death and resurrection are the new Exodus into the Promised Land, the way to Paradise restored.

And yet, among Jesus' fellow Jews, many find him a stumbling-block. The elder son in the parable stands for those who do not yet see in Jesus the fulfillment of the perfect righteousness that they seek. But before we denounce the elder brother's attitude, remember that the father in the parable is prodigal with his grace toward *both* his sons: "Son, *you are always with me*, and all that is mine is yours" (Lk 15.31). The father is inviting the elder son to the feast, as well: a reunion and reconciliation far more marvelous than the private gathering with friends that the resentful elder son had never received. This was the hour of grace and redemption that the elder son had awaited in his years of toil and service—if only he could see it! And so the story remains unfinished, open-ended, offering the hearers both a warning of judgment and an invitation to enter Jesus' Kingdom, even at great cost.

We, too, are like Adam and Israel and the Prodigal Son: on Ash Wednesday, we symbolically acknowledged that our sins have banished us from God's presence in Paradise, and the priest said to us, as to Adam, "Remember, man, that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Like the prodigal son in the land of exile, we have now come to ourselves and have resolved to return to the Father's house in this Lenten journey of penance. There, at the end of the journey in the Easter celebration, is our true homecoming and our resurrection: the white robe of our baptismal holiness and the ring of God's favor and the true Eucharistic sacrifice await us. Fittingly is this day known as *Laetare* Sunday—that is, Rejoice Sunday: for we were dead in our sins, and now we are alive in the Risen Son who is so prodigal with his grace. We were lost, and now in the Lord Jesus, we are found.