

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

I've Had It With This Pig-sty

Today's Scripture is the most hopeful and comforting set of messages. It encourages us to believe that we have a future different from the half-lit, uncomfortable, itching state of compromise that we have come to accept as our destiny. It isn't.

"Your Enslavement Is Over"?

Do you find your life today is truly, conspicuously *free*? We are constantly assured that it is; we are told how much *choice* we have, and how we are surrounded by *opportunities* as never before. At the same time, we seem to be vulnerable to the sense of being trapped, hampered, and restricted: it is always in someone's interest that we should feel oppressed, so that they can offer to release us (at a price) from what hinders us, frequently by selling us some device or commodity that will favour our leisure and lift our burdens. We're suckers for the idea that we deserve a holiday, a new sofa, or a huge loan on favourable terms. A different way to liberation is the one Francis of Assisi found: by refusing to own anything, he freed himself from greed, and possessiveness; he began to feel free to inherit the world from God the Father, by living as a son.

Sons And Father

This brings us neatly to the Gospel today, the story of a father with two sons. We might like to ask which of the two lived more freely: the one who took his inheritance, and set out to enjoy it? Or the one who was due to inherit the whole estate, but who told his father: *All these years I have slaved for you, and never once disobeyed your orders?* The wanderer spent all he had, and then fell victim to famine, and found himself in a subhuman slum. But was the outwardly respectable son any better off – in his own mind *enslaved for years* in an unrelieved state of grievance? The story's frame is important: Jesus tells it to scribes and Pharisees, to explain his friendship with "tax-collectors and sinners". We are meant to understand a bias toward the son who, in the eyes of such people, disgraced himself; and it is not hard to see a swipe at their solemn complacency in this creepy elder son: so self-righteous, so lacking in generosity or charm. Of course, the younger son is Luke's man; the outsider, with no credentials worth counting, financially ruined and ponging like a pig, he is an unlikely candidate for forgiveness; yet the

unforgettable moment in the story is the sight of this venerable Jewish *paterfamilias*, throwing to the wind any dignity or injured pride, running to enfold the malodorous apparition in his arms – an experience which, we think, has eluded his elder brother, who *never had any need of repentance*. He, meanwhile, is piling up more resentment, working yet one more day (still as a slave) in his father's fields. There was never a chance he would celebrate and rejoice for his brother's return. We may feel the party he never had with his friends is equally inconceivable; he simply doesn't have a party in him. Bitterness and meanness do not make party animals; perhaps the wasteful spending of an inheritance might actually have helped.

Freedom And Belonging

I think there is a sort of freedom that is sad – the freedom of the unattached, the uncommitted, the unloving and unloved. I'm free to do what I like if nobody cares what I do. If that's the ideal, I don't think I'm interested. The moment I love someone, and belong to them, I've *invested* my freedom, I've made a choice. Now I have indeed a bond, and bondage refers to slavery. The younger son comes home freely: but when he arrives, it is the father who calls the shots, and it is on his (magnificent) terms that this son finds his father's house opened to him. This freedom isn't stolen, or even asked-for, but bestowed as a gift. May it be ours.

Fr Philip