

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Fathering Sunday?

Every three years, on the Fourth Sunday of Lent (Mothering Sunday), we read the Prodigal Son story in Church. Some say a mother's love is unconditional, but a father's love has a measure of judgment about it. I wonder what the prodigal mother thought about her two boys....or about her husband!

Let Him Off The Hook

The first thing to say about the second son is that he's not the first - that is, the principal heir, who gets the house and the farm. So we shouldn't hold it against him that he asks for his money, and goes out to make his way in the world. This was the way for Jewish younger sons; the maintenance of the family home and the ancestral estates was the duty of the firstborn, and whilst younger children were welcome visitors, it was quite normal for the family (bluntly) to pay them to go away. What happens then is the problem: he wastes his inheritance and finds he can no longer support himself. Disaster!

Wasting Our Inheritance

is something we've all done. We aren't our parents, we're a new generation, and we need to make that clear. Thus the arrival in the eyes of teenagers of that threatened look which they never had as babies. They turn on their parents a suspicious and critical gaze, watching like hawks in case something is being put over on them. Everything is suddenly a problem, and the old simple world in the family seems lost forever. It can feel like death for parents, who begin to tire, and to doubt themselves: *where did we go wrong?* The young are just as troubled, not knowing quite what they mean, not really capable of right judgment, and full of hormones. I guess a lot of family relationship falls down the crack between the kids' adolescence and the parents' menopause.

A Necessary Struggle

Given our human capacity to waste our inheritance, it's a source of encouragement for us that God nevertheless thought this world worth making. If we think *our* lives are mysteriously hornswoggled and star-crossed, surely God might have shaken his divine head and gone for something better ordered. But he didn't. He let this world, with its prodigal *wastefulness*, come into being. Have you never felt the sheer amazement of the silent generosity that keeps showing in the

world? Get up in the morning and watch the sunrise, and sometimes you'll see a sight so absolutely heart-stopping that you can't think of anything else, and there's no-one there to look at it but you, and you're only there by accident. The world is ablaze with God's glory, and people still say *He hides his face from us*. The *redundancy* of the glory in Creation should teach us every day, that not everything has a price-tag, that the human cash-register understanding of the Creation is really very shallow, and that beneath all our meanness and anxiety, life actually flows like a babbling brook of milk and honey. In that context, the financial offences of the prodigal son don't look quite so heinous, even from a human standpoint.

What Does The Father Think?

The real quality of the Father in the story is a mystery to his sons. They obviously feel he is quite different from them. The younger believes that he has dished his relationship with his father by wasting money, and asks for a commercial deal instead: *Gizza job*. The elder looks more like a chip off the old block at first sight, but listen to *his* squalid and messed-up mind when he breaks his silence. *All my life, all my obedience - pure slavery! And you never once gave me a party*. The pronouns say a lot: his bitter *this son of yours* receives the father's gentle response, *My son*: but it is corrected by the words: *your brother*. He is pleading for the one thing that will repair the situation: the unity of the whole family. Really, it's no good trying to make our home in a world where the family is divided - even if it's divided by righteous indignation. What is at stake is the possibility of joy for all the members of the family; if it's going to happen for one, it must be shared by all. Neither the little party "to celebrate with my friends" that never happened, nor the drunken revelry that did, can be of any significance for this family. But the banquet of the fatted calf can, with goodwill, turn the situation round: because it is hosted by the father of both sons, and it is on his terms, it is the celebration they all need to set them to rights. But both sons must come in, both in their different ways must learn to be brothers; and then they stand a chance of inheriting the real wealth of their father, which neither of them has hitherto seen or understood, but which is both their birthrights.

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