

## What's The Difference?

What's the difference between the two boys in the "prodigal son" story? One's the elder, and he shows some of the qualities of eldest children: he's been told to be responsible, and more is expected of him because he's the eldest. This leads to a feeling of being trapped for many. They can't argue with it, and it seems like a kind of honour: but it lands them in trouble when their younger brothers or sisters go out of line. *Am I my brother's keeper?* says the first ever elder son.

### Younger Sons

The young are shown extra indulgence, and feel licensed to remain a bit childish. They can hide behind their big brother, and sometimes they even engineer him into hot water, knowing that he will cop the punishment for their offences. Our prodigal son went off without any great feelings of responsibility, and inevitably he wastes what he has been given. So far, the story has been fairly predictable. It is all in keeping with what we know happens in families. But this is the moment where something new happens. In his self-inflicted poverty, the younger son decides to change the tune. He will come home, acknowledge his faults, and begin a new relationship: he will be a worker, and his father will be the boss. It's not miraculously eloquent or inspiring; some fathers might think it was a bit off-colour, even unworthy. *But it brings him home.*

### Exodus

A fortnight ago we saw Jesus transfigured on the holy mountain, discussing with the prophets *his exodus which he would achieve in Jerusalem*. This *exodus* is described in the Fourth Gospel as "my going to the Father". I wonder if we could see in our prodigal brother the beginnings of a Christian, as he also decides to make a return to his father. It isn't that he shows any love for his father, or even that he revalues his past, flawed relationship with him; all he wants is a job with security, on his own terms. But he returns with nothing but his emptiness; and the Gospel is clear that what matters is not what *he* thinks about the situation, but what the *father* thinks. He makes an exodus out of the pig-sty, and returns to his father's house. What does he find there? *Milk and honey*, of course! The Land of Promise isn't built around human designs, because it is the land

that God will show us, and the land where he will teach us his laws and his ways. And it is just the same for our younger brother. He comes looking for his own needs, with his own plan; and the father blows it all out of the water, *with calf and robe and ring*.

### The Elder Son

We can all feel sorry for the elder brother. He watched his junior leaving for fun and games, and as time goes on he began to feel left out, bitter and poor. For him there is no exodus; he's where he always was, and it feels narrow and singularly un festive. When he hears the party beginning, he comes in from the fields to enquire, to be told that Eat Yourself Silly Day has been declared, all in honour of the boy who spent all he had on wine, women and song. It's the final straw. Note the word that he uses: *doulein* - "All these years I have *slaved* for you"! No exodus, indeed, for this young man; he is still imprisoned in Egypt, with the trapped mind and heart of a slave. That is the real difference between the two boys. No matter how he acquired it, the younger has tasted freedom, and now is exercising it. His elder brother is a slave.

### Lent

The climax of Lent will come as we unwrap once more the Law and the Prophets, and see as if for the first time how they all bear witness to the Easter Christ. Among the readings at the Easter Vigil none is more central than the retelling of the Exodus, when the chains of our fathers fell from their wrists, and they set out to return to the Promised Land of Abraham. Our Lenten task is to locate, and put a name to, whatever there is in us of slavery. Then, in the name of Jesus Christ, we are to come out of it, his hand sustaining us, his power put forth for us. On that night of nights, the vigil of the Passover of the Lord, we must be sure that we are not left sulking outside, nursing our grievances and obsessions, lonely and lost whilst the family gathers to be reborn in joy. For us, it is Jesus who let himself be lost for us, and then was found in our midst: who let himself be dead for us, and who has come back alive. He holds out his wounded hands to us, encouraging us to be reconciled, to be freed, and to be reborn, brothers and sisters in the Father's house, ready to feast deliriously on the bread of life. *Fr Philip*