

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

---

## The Parables of God's Mercy

This Sunday the liturgy serves us with three stories to show the quality of God's forgiveness. For us, forgiveness comes into play when we have got over our hurt and anger at some offence, and want to clean up the atmosphere. With God, who does not suffer from anger or hurt, it is profoundly different. *His original offer of eternal love* simply stands, ineradicable; it requires no change in him to receive us anew - the second time around, or the third, or the seventy-times-seventh. It is we who change, for good or ill.

### The Father

The choice of *parenthood* to symbolize this quality in God is of perfect pedigree; it comes from Jesus. He is the one who offers to us the thought of God's love as the medium into which we are born, and which precedes our knowledge - just as the learning of our human parents' love comes only progressively. I think we are aware of our mothers on a more immediate basis; they feed us and care for us so indefatigably and continuously as to form the world for us in our earliest days. I think our father comes into the picture more slowly, and there is more of a rôle for understanding and thinking before we can really understand his relation with us. This is the real plot of the parable of the Prodigal Son, whose return to his father is so delicately questionable in its motivation. You have only to ask yourself whether, if he were your son and you were his father, you would enjoy listening to your boy's *Thoughts From The Pigsty*. The answer is easy to find: you would hardly care what his motives were, *if only they brought him home*. The signs are that it is the same with God; for him, our unworthiness and ignorance are nothing new and are part of the plan. If we would criticise the motives of the Prodigal Son, we can criticise the "faithful" son just as easily, and no doubt we could criticise, from a divine point of view, the motives of St Thomas Aquinas and St Thérèse of Lisieux as well. All our striving, all our approaches to sanctity, are tiny advances along the distance between us and God. What matters to God seems to be which way we are facing. He is good at bridging gaps, but if we choose to face away from him then there is not much he can do, according to his own rules of engagement, to cancel the distance between us. This is the real meaning of the concept of conversion. It doesn't matter how deep in the pig-sty we have sunk: if we decide to look towards God, he is beside us: *while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and was convulsed with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms, and kissed him tenderly.*

### Enter the joy of God

The reception of the wandering son into his father's house is not on his own terms - mercenary and mean-spirited as they doubtless are. The father has his own plans, and the power to carry them out. He robes him and shoes him and places on his finger the ring of an honoured family member, not because he has deserved it, but because he is loved by the father. St Augustine knew how to think of this mystery. He has a favourite text from Isaiah: *Return, rebels, to your (own) heart* (46:8). He thought the phrase in the pigsty that was most important was: *then he came to himself*. To turn back to God, Augustine believed, is the only proper form of self-interest. Where could a self-interested person turn to, where find greater blessing, than in the one who made him? So this exhausted, ruined boy in his sty *comes back to himself*, and in the same moment realises he must go back to his father. Here is a reason for thinking that, for God, who is justice and truth, forgiveness comes instantly and naturally. God, who is justice itself, knows we can only live if he forgives us. Therefore his forgiveness is already written into our creation; he could only make us on condition that he forgives us and will always forgive us. But our reception too will be on God's terms, not ours; and that is the measure for which we must learn to hope. After all, left to our choices and estimates, we stand little chance of creating a decent human future, let alone the kind of divine bliss which God has in mind for us.  
*Fr Philip*