

There are some annoying people whose minds are made up and finished at a very early age. They know everything and have understood everything, and their path is set in concrete. We've all met them, and many of them are reputed to be marvellous Catholics, which in one sense is true; they are mostly monsters, because no-one should have his or her mind made up about what it is to be human - however old or apparently wise we may become. The understanding of our human state is the task of a lifetime - we never cease to be apprentices in the art of living a human life. Why is this?

For the very simple reason that the purpose and the aim of a human life is hidden in the heart of God, and there is not one of us who is expert in the thinking of God. The greater the saint, the more clear the knowledge of ignorance before the depths of the Spirit of God, where the truth about us lies hidden.

The two boys in our Lord's great story today represent two states we can easily recognise. One seems to wander away from the Father, to make his own home and his own life without any longer remembering the way of his home and family. It would be easy to say that the other son represents fidelity and loyalty and understanding. But it isn't so. The elder son is staying at home, but there is no joy in him; he is working hard, but his work simply fills his life with the smell of slavery, the curse of Adam. In his way, he is as far from his father as the boy who wastes all he's been given in a far country.

Many of our compatriots and contemporaries in England have voted with their feet, and moved away from the Father's house, and they too seek to fulfil themselves with the waste and indulgence which is their reward in the world. But what about us, who are still here, who give the world the witness of fidelity and loyalty and understanding? Do we really know the heart of our Father, do we come home from a day's hard work with our hearts bright and alive with love? Or do we fill the house with the sad scent of enslavement, the bitterness of deprived and thwarted humanity?

The boy in the pigsty doesn't come home with any great change of heart. He left to indulge himself, and he ran out of funds. He doesn't experience a great conversion, and long to be loved and honoured in his Father's house. He returns with the stated refusal of such a prospect: I only want work and a pay-packet. He is still a worldling. But he returns. He returns, because his only way is to go home. However little he understands it, he is sure that his father will not see him starve. And that is a state of mind with which the father can work.

The elder son's mind is impenetrably made up. He has made his mind up long ago: he will slave for his father until his father dies. Even the sound and sight and smell of a feast cannot tempt him out of his slavery and into the home as it should always have been. He complains that he has never been given a feast; but there has never been a cause for rejoicing in him, he has turned the home into a barracks for slaves. It is this boy that we should be thinking of today; because we are him, and he is us. We should look hard at ourselves, and ask ourselves how we have made in the Church an atmosphere of drudging and bitter servitude, instead of a place of rejoicing, where the family can be reunited - not in our short commons and poor vision, but in the mysteriously generous love of the father.