

4th Sunday in Lent - Year C

The Lord Whom Welcomes Sinners.

*We celebrate this Mass in the joy of forgiveness,
and gratefully eat the manna,
the food our Father gives us for our journey to the kingdom
where his banquet is prepared for us.*

In parishes up and down the country, people like me are standing before congregations like you, many, though not all, with carefully prepared sermons about Mother's day. They will speak about the many virtues of the motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and her very special human relationship to the Son of God, and they will theologize on all that that implies. They might explain how today is a day marked out for refreshing oneself, when one relaxes from the self-imposed rigors of Lent: a point reflected by the liturgical colour for today, in which we see a toning down of the harsh purple to the softer rose (*not Pink!*). Gifts of posies may be given out, and on the whole, people will feel rather nice, at least, those who are mothers. But some will not. Some will feel left out. Some may even find it all a bit painful.

Whilst sitting at my desk, trying to think of something original to say, it occurred to me that today is really about relationships in general, not just mothers and children, but all relationships. Most especially, it is about our relationship with God. As Lent is a time for reflecting and reaffirming our relationships with God and our neighbour, today is an opportunity to stand back from the intensity of that reflecting, a time when we can take stock of where we are. And today's gospel helps us to do just that.

Psychologist, and experts who know about such things, tell us, the most profound and intense fear a child will experience expresses itself in what is technically referred to as '*Separation Anxiety*'. Simply, this is the fear of being rejected and abandoned by their parents. Children are afraid that the love which brings them into the world, the love which gives them security, will be withdrawn, so that they end up alone, discarded, and disowned. Put another way, *Separation Anxiety* is the fear of living in the absence of familiar love; of being separated, or isolated, and having no place to belong to.

Of course, it doesn't take a genius to realise that that fear is not limited to children! It is a fear we all experience at one time or another, and to many, varying degrees. Often through very painful and bitter experience, we learn that love is not automatic. Though we may not understand why, we accept that a father will not automatically love his son, or that a brother will love his sister, or a daughter love her mother. One only has to look at the, all too many cases of abuse within the family, to see proof of that.

Sadly, we know that in an ever growing number of cases, when a child leaves home, instead of there being any sense of loss, there can be a real feeling of relief. How often have you heard someone say, of their own children, "good riddens to him". Or, "She won't be missed". You can almost hear it being said, "Why don't you do everyone a favour and just get lost".

It is this attitude of carelessly writing people off that is at the heart of today's gospel. The sinners come to hear Jesus, but the Pharisees and the scribes come to complain that Jesus welcomes them, and even eats with them! They want Jesus to let them stay lost. After all, they are really not worth bothering with.

The Pharisees, whose very name means ‘separated ones’, self-righteously see themselves as being virtuous, and therefore, far superior, and manifestly much more worthwhile. They distance themselves from ‘sinners’, avoiding all relationship with them. Jesus, on the other hand, sees both groups as children of the Father and, therefore, kindred to each other. And to explain this in language they might understand, Jesus tells the parable we have just heard, in which a father loses both of his two sons.

The younger son gets lost in a distant land, whereas, the elder son gets lost staying at home. The younger son wantonly abandons the security of his home, only to find himself in a place of despair and hunger, a place of degradation, and even possible death. He is in real danger of starving, far from his family, forgotten and forsaken. But he comes to his senses and realises that he doesn’t really belong there; that he has a home where he does belong.

There is nothing quite like hunger to sharpen up one’s sense of belonging! The mere thought of regular, square meals is enough to lead him back in the right direction. And so, with empty stomach he makes his return at full speed.

Whilst all this has been going on, his father has refused to accept the loss of his son as being just ‘one of those things’. For him, his son’s absence has not destroyed their relationship. If the son has let go of the father, the father has not let go of the son. Rather, he stays on the lookout. His eyes scan the horizon for his son’s return. His love fosters the hope that his son will return one day. And when he does see his son, a long way off, his love takes the initiative. Moved with pity, he runs to greet him, uninterested in explanations, or wasting time on small-talk. Instead, he organizes a slap-up feast. And why not? After all, joy of joy, his son is found!

Now, the elder son is something of a ‘workaholic’, the type who takes life just a bit too seriously, the type who stays out in the field long after the cows have come home. When he makes his return journey home, unlike his younger brother, he doesn’t make it.

Almost unable to contain himself with happiness, the father comes out a second time that day to greet a son. But the response this time is one of those agonizing performances we would all much rather avoid. “All these years I have slaved for you, and what thanks do I get?” Evidently, he sees fidelity as slavery.

What weighs so heavily on his father’s heart is that his elder son is indeed enslaved. Wanting to maintain the estate without any obligations to his younger brother, he is imprisoned by his own inflexible sense of justice. He has no measure of comprehension in him. In fact, he is the ‘separated one’, refusing to recognize his own brother, content for him to remain lost. Unlike his father, he cannot surprise his brother with the quality of his mercy. His hard work has made him hard-hearted. As Yeats once wrote, ‘Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart.’

When we look at ourselves we can probably see parts, or aspects of each of the three characters within us. At the very least, we would hope for the part of the father which has a keen eye for those who are lost (and of course, a good nose for when a party is needed.) However, there is also within all of us, the younger son that wants to grab everything, and to try everything we shouldn’t. And there is, in us, the elder brother, which causes us to make other people pay for our own loveless, sour devotion. All three characters are within us, competing to shape our lives.

Let us pray that the ‘father’ in us will be fit and willing to run for mercy’s sake. And let us recognize that there are so many of our brothers and sisters who are a very long way from home.