

Heavenly loving Father, you are a parent to each of us. By your Holy Spirit speak to us words of love, forgiveness and hope, and enable us to turn and run into the arms of Jesus. Amen.

- In the much loved parable of the prodigal son, Jesus is not telling a story about how a family should behave.
  - Doting Father gives wayward son whatever he asks for.
  - Mother isn't even mentioned. The little lady is probably in the back somewhere doing the washing up.
  - Children at loggerheads with each other and given little helpful advice or support on how to move on.
  - The days after the party must surely have been particularly tense as the older son smoulders and the younger son luxuriates. Has he learnt his lesson? Has the Father learned his lesson?
- No. Jesus is not giving us a blueprint for family life.
- Rather he is challenging the Pharisees. ... They were upset about Jesus spending time with what they considered profligate younger sons. *'the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'*
- And Luke, whose gospel it is, was writing for a church where Jewish Christians were being challenged by gentiles, outsiders who were turning to Christ and expecting equality. Profligate younger sons coming crawling home expecting acceptance. 'Why should they, when we've been keeping the Jewish Law for so long?!
- No, this is a story about relationships and acceptance and second chances.
  - Which, even if it doesn't mention women at all, is quite a good start for Mothering Sunday and helps us to look at the relationships in our own family and circle of friends.
  - Because the problem with Mothering Sunday is that it's supposed to be all nice, assuming the perfect caricature of family life. Like the front of a Ladybird book, two well behaved children with nicely brushed hair sitting with smiling parents, the husband wearing a tie and the wife with well-manicured nails in a skirt, enjoying family time at the tea table.
  - Well, isn't your experience of family life like that?
- So let's return to the dysfunctional farming family in our tragi-comic parable of the prodigal son and look at the various relationships underlying the parent and the children.
- The parent obviously deeply loved the younger son. Some would say foolishly loved the younger son. Certainly sacrificially loved the younger son. Sacrificial enough to entrust him with the proceeds of half his farm.
  - Clearly a foolish thing to do as the parable demonstrates all too well but remember this is a parable, not a blueprint for parenting. You have to dig a little deeper to get that.
  - And what you can certainly say is that the doting parent certainly loved his son enough to give him everything he had. You could say his love for his children made him give it everything he had.
- I guess that most parents do their best to give their parenting role everything they've got. It's just that because we are human beings what we have to give is often not very much, not enough.
  - Seemingly on a morning after a sleepless night, it feels like never enough.
- Your role as a parent, or your role as a child, may come from a variety of different backgrounds and may involve contentment, or disappointment, frustration or surprise, sadness and loss or new beginnings ... and quite possibly a mixture of all of the above.
- But whether you feel your parenting or that of your parents, has more elements of success than failure or the other way round, it can be affirming to remind yourself that the initial love that rises between a parent and a child means that nearly all parents give it all they've got. It's just that as we've said, what they've got may not be very much or may not be enough!
  - Because let's face it, in this parable, which of the three, the parent, the younger son or the elder son, would be likely to think of themselves as the perfect parent? Which of them did not seem to be afflicted with self-doubt? Which one didn't think they needed forgiving of anything? Was it not the older son?

- Jesus seems to be saying that if you don't think you have anything to be forgiven for, you are in the most danger of missing out on family life, and indeed any other sort of life. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* It's hard to forgive if you don't know what it's like to be forgiven.
- We'll come back to the older son in a moment but first have a look at the younger son. What was he like at loving?
  - His love for his parent was strong enough, secure enough, to dare to hope. Secure enough to return. To turn round and visibly repent. To hope that his parent would forgive him enough to be a slave. Board and lodging in exchange for working on the farm. Indeed he knew that was all he deserved. *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'*
  - He'd either had a very good grounding at home or he'd learned a very salutary lesson in his self-loathing when feeding the pigs. Or perhaps both.
  - This is where the transformation comes in. This is where the new beginnings come in. The parent running to greet the wayward, obstinate, selfish child. The child he clearly loved more than life itself.
  - It happened because of love. It happened because the younger son said sorry. Interestingly if this were a true story instead of a parable, do you think the parent would need to apologize as well?
- Of course, one of the things we don't know is how the story might continue after the fatted calf had been eaten and the party was over, and normal hum-drum family life resumed. Did it all end happily ever after? Did the younger son settle down and become a useful member of society? Did he continue to let his older longsuffering brother do all the work? Did he do something else despicable and selfish? And if he did, did the parent forgive him again?
  - For an answer you need to ponder upon the all-encompassing eternal aspect of the love of God, the knowledge that the younger son has clearly discovered how to say sorry, and the truth that human beings frequently make the same mistake over and over again.
  - Where can you see your family life, your relationships, your parenting in all that?
- Let's return to the older son. The one who refused to come into the party when his brother returned. Why is he not loving? His parent clearly loves him. What has gone wrong? Well, perhaps it's what I alluded to earlier. He does not know what it feels like to be forgiven. As far as he's concerned, he's never done anything wrong. He's 'religiously' done his duty, day after day, and he'd quite like it recognized. Possibly a holiday? Possibly a position of authority over the younger son? It all seems fair enough, especially when you look at it from his viewpoint.
  - However, remember this isn't a blueprint on parenting and family life. It's a parable. It's not there to make sense, rather, it's there to make us think.
- And the truth of the matter is that the elder son, the free human being, has put himself in the position of a slave, doing what he's told and with real passive-aggressive intent, not taking the initiative over a party or a holiday
  - Whereas ironically, the younger son, came back as a slave and was restored to a free human being.
  - Only the older son could make the decision to repent, to turn round and go into the party with a good grace. The parent could presumably force him to come in, but he couldn't control the older son's self-pitying emotions.
- This Mothering Sunday, what does all this say to you about your own family, your own relationships?
  - If it prompts you to say sorry? Give thanks to Jesus.
  - If it prompts you to understand the callous nature of someone near to you a bit better? Give thanks to Jesus.
  - If it prompts you to be more forgiving of yourself in the mistake you have made in relationships? Give thanks to Jesus.
  - And if it prompts you to be grateful for what you've been given. Give thanks to Jesus.
- For after all Jesus is the one whose Parent *'For our sake ... made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'* Amen.