

## 24th Sunday of the Year, Year C

The Gospel is the well-loved parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The following text aims to show the structure of the parable, the better to grasp the key point. Notice that each half hinges on IV. There is a connection (mirroring) between I and Ia, II and IIa, and III and IIIa.

'Now all the **tax collectors and sinners** were coming near to listen to him. And the **Pharisees and the scribes** were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable ...There was a man who had two sons

<b>The Younger son</b> ( = the tax collectors and sinners) : Luke 15:12-24	<b>The Elder son</b> ( = the Pharisees and scribes) : Luke 15:25-
<p><b>I. The father and son are separated</b> The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his means of livelihood between them. A few days later the younger son sold all he had and travelled to a distant country.</p>	<p><b>I. The elder son comes in from the fields</b> Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the boys and asked what was going on.</p>
<p><b>II. The son loses everything</b> There he squandered his wealth in wasteful living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.</p>	<p><b>II. He hears that the father is celebrating his brother's return and is angry</b> He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go.</p>
<p><b>III. Sin leads to total rejection</b> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; but no one gave him anything.</p>	<p><b>III. The father comes out to his son</b> His father came out and began to plead with him.</p>
<p><b>IV. A change of mind</b> But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "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."' So he set off and went to his father.</p>	<p><b>IV. The elder son rejects his brother and his father's welcome of him</b> But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'</p>
<p><b>IIIa. Total acceptance by his Father leads to true repentance</b> But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have</p>	<p><b>IIIa. The father tells his son of his love</b> Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.'</p>

sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'	
<b>IIa. The son receives everything</b> But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'	<b>IIa. The father explains the reasons for the celebration</b> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found'.
<b>Ia. The father and son celebrate their reunion</b> And they began to celebrate.	<b>Ia. Will the elder son join the celebration?</b> ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?

This parable is neatly arranged in two sections. The first section focuses on the younger son who accepts his Father's invitation to join in the celebration which has been organised for his welcome home. The second section focuses on the elder son. He, too, is invited to the banquet, but we are not told whether he accepts or not.

At the beginning of the story, the younger son is portrayed as being completely self-centred and as having no regard for his father. He treats his father as though he were already dead by asking for his share in the inheritance (I). Then, when his father accedes to his request, he sells his half of the property, depriving his father of the produce and alienating for ever the family inheritance (II).

He squanders everything in extravagant living, finds himself destitute, and ends up in what is for a Jew the utterly humiliating position of feeding unclean animals. We are told that 'no one gave him anything'. He would have been happy with the 'pods' – the bitter and un nourishing berries from the thorny carob bush (III).

The turning point (IV) in the story comes when the boy reflects on his condition. He thinks of his father and is confident that his father will accept him back. There is no question yet of genuine repentance. He still has no interest in a personal relationship with his father, but decides to use him to survive. He wants to keep his independence by being a hired hand. In this way he will not have to seek reconciliation or develop any kind of proper relationship either with his father or his brother. All he wants is to be assured of something to eat.

He sets off, and then the focus changes to the father. It is the father's immense love that brings about the boy's repentance (IIIa). The father has been on the look out for the boy all the time, longing for his return. He catches sight of him while he is still a long way off and he is 'filled with compassion'. It is this compassion that will bring about the boy's change of attitude. The father casts dignity aside and runs through the village, eager to reach his boy before any of the other villagers decided to hurt him. What the boy has done to his father threatens the basic social structure of village life. The father throws his arm around the boy and kisses him. After that no one can reject the boy without also rejecting the father. This display of unconditional love moves the boy to true repentance. For the first time we see the dawning of a real son-father relationship. The father's love shows him that it is the relationship that is paramount, not the lost property. Mending the relationship is something that the boy cannot do for all his scheming; it depends on the father's grace. The young lad is overwhelmed with humility and, for the first time, allows himself to be truly a son. When we compare verse twenty-one with verse nineteen, we see that all reference to being a hired hand has been dropped. In accepting the unmerited gift of being a son, the boy

is accepting the need to be reconciled with the older brother, and to be once again under his father's authority. It will also mean setting aside the satisfaction of having earned his own way back.

The father overwhelms him with welcoming love (IIa). The festive robe in which he has him clothed requires of everyone that they give the boy the respect due to the father himself. The ring demonstrates absolute trust, and the slaves are required to look up to the boy as to their master.

A calf is killed – an indication that the whole village is invited to the welcoming home festivities. The lost boy has been found. 'They began to celebrate'(Ia). A happy ending, thanks to the amazing love of the father. The boy, like the tax collectors and sinners (15:1), accepted the invitation with joy.

We now turn to the elder son (I), symbol of the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling about Jesus' behaviour (15:2). How is the elder son going to respond? We have already been given some hints as to his character. We might have expected him to reprimand his brother when he requested his share of the inheritance, but he is silent. Moreover, when the inheritance is divided, we are told that the father 'divided his property between *them*'(15:12). The elder son does not object to receiving his share while the father is still alive. It seems that he, too, has no real concern for the father.

From one of the slaves (or perhaps one of the children playing outside the banquet hall) he learns about his brother's return. His response is one of anger and 'he refused to go in'(II). Because he is the elder son he has certain responsibilities to perform. His refusal to go in has to be taken as a public insult offered to his father.

The father is as loving to him as he is to the younger brother. He does not stand on dignity, but humbles himself by coming out to plead with him (III).

He is met with angry complaints (IV). The elder boy thinks of his relationship with his father not as that of a son to his father but as that of a slave to his master. He complains that he has never been given 'even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends'. We already know that all that is left of the property has been already given to him by his father. The father retained the right to the use of the produce, but the property itself belongs to the elder son who can use it as he wills. Furthermore, if he wants to celebrate with his friends all he has to do is respond to his father's invitation. The whole village is celebrating. If he has any friends they are all inside! His second complaint is about his brother. Notice that he calls him 'this son of yours'. He does not look upon him as a brother any more than the Pharisees see the tax collectors and sinners as their brothers. Furthermore, in his self-centred anger he exaggerates his brother's crimes. Nothing has been said about 'prostitutes'.

The father attempts to win him over, calling him 'my son'(IIIa) and reminding him that 'you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours'.

He also speaks of 'this brother of yours' and of the importance of the celebration (IIa).

The parable ends there. The listener has to supply the ending. Both sons represent alternative options made by Israel. The younger son is in exile because of sin, but is being called back to grace in Jesus' ministry and can now carry out Israel's vocation to the Gentile world (see Acts 15 and Amos 9:11). The elder son, in the name of being a guardian of tradition, is resisting the building of the new temple.

Will the elder boy go in or will he continue his obstinate refusal. This is the precise point Jesus is making to the Pharisees, and to any of us who might fancy ourselves as being better than anyone else and who might take it upon ourselves to sit in judgment on our brother or sister.

The sin of the younger brother is awful, but he does respond to the astonishing love of his father. He does repent and so he is enjoying the banquet. The sin of the elder brother is worse, for it is a sin of pride. Will he see this and repent? Or will he be too proud to share the feast with his brother and remain obstinate in his refusal to celebrate?