

## Homily for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent 2022 Year C

Today's Gospel is the familiar story of the Prodigal Son. But did you know, that if you ask people what lesson they learn from it, or which character they sympathise with and support, it is usually either the younger son or the father that stands out for them.

Some people support the Prodigal Son himself and say that the lesson he teaches us is that no matter how far from God we wander, all that we have to do is turn back to Him and we will be forgiven. That is true, but is the Prodigal Son the most fitting character to show us the generosity of God's Love? I do not think so.

Look at the details of the story. Here is the classic selfish, self-centred exploiter of another person's love. The sort of person who causes so much unhappiness and misery in human relationships. What did he do? He exploited his father's love for him. He forced his father to sell off half of his property and estates and then give the money to him. He did not care for his father's or brother's feelings. He did not care how long it had taken his father to build up his wealth. He only wanted what he thought was due to him now, even though it meant impoverishing his father and brother. But that did not matter to him; what only mattered to him was what he, and he alone wanted. It is not as if he was going to put this money to good use, he only wanted to squander it on having a good time.

Now he was not a stupid person; he was a cold and calculating person; he knew that the money would not last forever and that it would run out eventually. But that did not worry him because he was determined to have that good time. Once the money did run out, he calculated, he would have no trouble exploiting his father's love for him once more. There was no doubt in his mind that his father would have him back. There is no evidence in the story of any repentance or sorrow from him about his actions, just his calculating mind working out the new scenario. He knew his father's servants had a better standard of living than him, and so a loving father would not stand by and see his younger son living with less. He had even worked out the words he would say to his father to soften his father's heart.

And, of course, it all worked. Once an exploiter or user, always an exploiter or user. There he is taking the best of what his father had left of food, clothing, and jewellery. And I bet that if that story continued, there would not be a happy ending. Once he had wheedled his way back into his father's affections, in no time at all he would want equal treatment, and of course, when his father died, he would still want to inherit half of what was left.

The younger son exploited another's love, not a good example to be held up for anybody.

Then there is the father. A lot of people see him as the central figure of the story, a wonderful example of enduring love and forgiveness.

But look at him a little more closely and you will perhaps see someone who is damaged by love, damaged to the degree that it has made him soft headed and soft hearted, and his powers of judgement have been affected.

Here is a man so desperate to retain the love of his younger son, that he would do anything to please him, even to selling half of all his possessions in a desperate attempt to keep that love. He cannot see that that is doomed to failure and how unfair it is on his other son.

And then what does he do when the son returns? Out comes the best of everything, once more, ostensibly to celebrate, but he is making the same mistake all over again. One wonders, as the years go by, what other sacrifices he will have to make to satisfy the greed of his son.

Two sad and tragic characters, father and son. The first vulnerable to exploitation because of his love and tenderness, the second only too willing to exploit what he sees as weaknesses.

That great love of the father is commendable, but not to the degree that it eventually harms the best interests of his son. Real love sometimes needs to know limits. It needs to understand when to say "no".

Now look at the third character, the elder son. We do not know an awful lot about him, but from what we do know, there is ample evidence that he is a victim of love. Here is a man whose whole life perhaps has been wounded by the demands of living with the poor relationship between his father and his younger brother.

After the birth of his brother, he probably always received the short end of the stick, but out of love, duty, and loyalty to both his father and his brother, he

quietly plodded on, putting up with overindulgence of the one and the selfishness of the other. He must have been appalled at his father's decisions to give half of the inheritance to his younger brother. He could see that this would not be the end of it. But there was not much he could do about it. Even so he still stayed and worked for his father.

Sure enough, back came his brother and once more he got the best of everything and probably always would. The reassurance of his father that everything he had was his must have fallen on sceptical ears. His love and fidelity had always been taken for granted and always probably would be.

Now, whenever we hear that story in the Gospel, we are free to take our pick of which of the three characters we sympathise with and use as a role model. But seen in this new light, it is perhaps not so easy or straightforward.

If we think a little deeper about the story, it can illustrate to us what a fragile, hurtful, and even harmful thing love can sometimes be between people.

Like the air that we breathe, we cannot live without love. The quality of our life and happiness is determined by the quality of our experience of love.

Being loved and being able to love helps us and heals us, but sometimes it also hurts us and harms us.

Love is like some raw natural energy, but to be of its best, it needs focus and direction; it needs borders and boundaries; it needs to know limits, balance, and proportion to be healthy, and that applies whether we are loving God, loving each other, or loving ourselves.

The Gospel story shows us how very exploitable love is.

The younger son's selfishness exploited his father's love. The father's need for his younger son's love made him exploit that son's selfishness to try to buy his love. The older son's love and fidelity was exploited by both his brother and his father by being taken for granted.

Now Christ in all of his stories and parables tries to teach us that the nature of his love, Christian love, is always self-sacrificing, not self-serving.

Both the father's and younger brother's love was self-serving, but in different ways. For my money, it is the older brother's love that stands out as the example to be imitated, the same self-sacrificing love that led Christ to the Cross.

Years later, Saint Paul writing to the Corinthians, gave what is now a famous definition of the quality of self-sacrificing love. He wrote, "Love is always patient and kind; it is never rude nor selfish; it always delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse and to trust; it always hopes to endure whatever comes but love itself does not come to an end".

It is about time the older brother got the recognition that he deserves.