

Homily for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2022 Year C

The Gospel we have heard this morning is the familiar story of the Prodigal Son.

Whenever we listen to this Gospel story we are trying to do something very difficult. We are trying, as St Paul says, "To put on the mind of Christ".

We are teaching ourselves to perhaps think and act as Christ himself would in a particular situation or problem.

Christ used these simple stories and parables and the people listening to them would identify with the character in that story and try to act likewise.

In the story we have just heard most people identify straight away with the Prodigal Son. We learn that no matter how great our sin, how big our mistake, we can always turn back with confidence to God our loving Father.

Some people, especially the parents of difficult children, find it easier to identify with the Father in that story. They have experienced the lack of love and gratitude of their own children, and yet they cannot stop loving that child. The story reassures them, but it is right to always remain open to the needs of that child, especially when they come to their senses and need their forgiveness and acceptance to be able to start again. That is a hard thing for a parent to do sometimes, when the heart says one thing, but the head says something else.

Very few people identify with the Second Son. If you think about it, it is the Second Son that most of us resemble or highlights a particular problem that most of us must face.

The Second Son was loyal, faithful, and hardworking and then suddenly all that seemed to count for nothing. His selfish brother got exactly what he wanted, regardless of how that affected the feelings of others. But then worse still, having squandered everything, he came back and was welcomed like a king. A classic case of life kicking you in the teeth.

Apply the Second Son's dilemma to ourselves. How many of us perhaps put in long, hard, faithful years of service to a company, and then we are laid off or made redundant and our lifetime contribution counts for nothing. How many of us invested years of loving care, anxiety and sacrificing raising a child, only to have it thrown back

in our face by some stupid act of adolescent rebellion. It feels like it all counted for nothing.

How many of us perhaps invest an enormous amount of love, patience and emotion in a marriage or relationship, only to have that betrayed when your partner is unfaithful or deserts you.

Everybody in some sort of way experiences the arbitrary unfairness of life. You keep the rules, you keep faithfully at it through the good times and bad, you try to love God and lead a moral holy life, and then suddenly some sort of incident happens that seemingly seems to wipe it all away; the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and it is those that cut the corners that seem to prosper and thrive. The selfish and the self-centred seem to both have their cake and eat it.

The pain the Second Son felt was because he thought that his life of goodness and fidelity made no difference.

There is a very important religious lesson to be learnt here. Perhaps more important than the lesson the first Son teaches, that you can always turn to God for forgiveness and mercy.

The lesson is this.

If we lead good, moral, holy and faithful lives, often witnessing at some cost, to the virtues of honesty, truth, purity and love, we should do so because those things are worthy in themselves and not because we feel we can use our holiness to somehow influence and bend the will of God. We cannot barter or bargain with God because of our virtue.

In the story, the Father reassures the Second Son, that “Everything I have is yours”, but I do not love your brother any less for what he has done.

God has no favourites. He does not love some of His Creation and His Creatures more than others. His Love is all embracing and unconditional. We can do nothing to earn it or deserve it, it is utterly freely given.

How we live our lives, of course, matters. It does make a difference. But our virtue cannot be used to buy God's extra love or favour.

Some people might not like that idea, that lack of security makes us want to feel perhaps special in God's sight, as if we say all the prayers and do all the things right then perhaps we become extra special in God's sight and feel a bit more secure.

But we are wrong. We cannot buy God's love. God cannot love us more than he loves us now, but the fullness of that love does not protect us from the injustices and unfairnesses of life. When those things hit and hurt us, we complain to God because we feel short-changed. We feel we perhaps deserve a little better because we have tried hard to say more prayers and make more sacrifices.

Our mercenary mentality reduces God to a Heavenly Accountant. If we do more, then we deserve more. If we cannot break free of that way of thinking, then we will always have a problem.

Lots of people's religious motivation and security is built upon that mentality, and they would find it the hardest thing in the world to change.

We might therefore ask why we should bother to live a life that is honest and good if it makes no difference to how much God loves us?

The answer must be it most certainly does matter. It will not increase God's love for us, but it will deepen and increase our love for God.

We cannot love God in any meaningful way and be a liar, crook, cheat, fornicator, slanderer, or murderer.

The practical way we express our love for God is living out those virtues in our lives. Our motivation has to be pure. We have to live our lives because they are worthy, good, beautiful and life enriching things in themselves, not because we expect reward or preference from God for them. They do not increase God's love for us, but they increase our love for God.

Gratitude for having been able to live in God's grace should always show itself in delight when God's grace touches someone else.