

Believe

Lenten Program 2013

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A six week **Lenten Program** calling us to discover
God's ***fidelity*** and ***merciful love***



Catholic Diocese of
Wollongong
Bearers of Christ's Love

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Fourth Sunday of Lent

*Your brother here was dead and
has come to life*

Opening Prayer

O God, who through your Word
reconcile the human race to yourself in a
wonderful way,
grant, we pray,
that with prompt devotion and eager faith
the Christian people may hasten
toward the solemn celebrations to come.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the
Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel: Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

The tax collectors and the sinners were all seeking the company of Jesus to hear what he had to say, and the Pharisees and the scribes complained. “This man,” they said, “welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he spoke this parable to them:

“A man had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything

he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

“When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch, so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled his belly with the husks the pigs were eating but no one offered him anything. Then he came to his senses and said, ‘How many of my father’s paid servants have more food than they want, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants.’ So he left the place and went back to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening,

and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

"Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about, 'Your brother has come' replied the servant 'and your father has killed the calf we had fattened because he has got him back safe and sound.' He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out to plead with him; but he answered his father, 'Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his women – you kill the calf we had been fattening.'

"The father said, 'My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.'"

Pause for silent reflection

Fr Graham's Commentary

Today is the original *Mother's Day* and is still observed as such in England. Because the Lenten discipline was relaxed on this day (the half-way mark of Lent), servant girls in England in times past were permitted to visit their mothers. Still today in the Liturgy the mood is relaxed as the Church begins to anticipate the coming Feast – flowers in the sanctuary again, and rose-coloured vestments (half-way between violet and gold).

The Church shows her motherliness today by the choice of the most comforting of all Jesus' parables – *the Prodigal Son*. It is really wrongly

named, for the son is not the hero. It is the story of the *Loving Father* ('prodigal' or reckless in his love), and nowhere in the whole of Scripture is the true nature of God better portrayed. Because of this, Chapter 15 of St Luke is actually called the Gospel within the Gospel.

We sometimes underestimate the terrible thing the younger son did – he wished his father dead! He virtually said to his father, 'Dad, I can't wait until you're dead. I want my inheritance now!' Broken-hearted as he was, the father allowed his son to leave home, even though he had a fair idea of what was going to happen. Jesus' audience probably gasped at the idea of a Jewish boy walking out on his family. God the Father permits us the full use of our free will, even when he knows we will abuse it. Love does this. God takes us seriously. Hence the awesome responsibility entailed in possessing free will, and the irresponsibility of blaming God when things go wrong.

But even when the son had abandoned the father, the father had not abandoned him. The words, "while he was still a long way off" bring out this point. It was not by accident that the father was out along the road that day. It's obvious he had been going out along the road every day, hoping against hope that today would be the day his son came home. The point is, the father had forgiven his son long before the son decided to return. God is always faithful, whether or not we are faithful. It is a central theme of Scripture. No situation is so thoroughly sinful that God's grace cannot be at work there for good. The parable emphasises this point by placing the boy in a pig pen, about as low as a Jew could get.

But the boy *came to himself* implying that, apart from God, we are not ourselves. He examined his conscience and regretted his fall. "I will leave this place and go to my father and say..." he prepared his confession and rehearsed what he was going to say. "I have sinned against heaven and against

you” is an expression of sorrow for his offence. “Treat me as one of your paid servants” reveals a purpose of amendment, and an acceptance that some penalty has to be paid. Restoration to full sonship was beyond his expectations.

But the mercy of God always surpasses our expectations. Look at the story. The son came home pleading to be taken back not as a son but in the lower work of slaves, the hired servants who were only day labourers. The ordinary slave was in some sense a member of the family, but the hired servant could be dismissed at a day’s notice. The father never even gave his boy the chance to make his apology – he broke in before that, so overwhelmed he was at his son’s return. The robe stands for honour – the early Christians would have seen a symbol of the baptismal garment here; the ring was synonymous for authority – a signet ring implied power of attorney; and the shoes were a sign of full restoration into the family – slaves were unshod so that they could not run away. And the feast began.

How wonderful that God should treat us like that! This parable should always be before our minds as we approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Perhaps some are tempted to feel sorry for the elder brother. The spoilt brother comes home, gets a big party, while the faithful one who stayed home is simply taken for granted! It seems so unjust – at first glance. The true story is that the older boy is actually cold-hearted and jealous. He is incapable of rejoicing at his brother’s return.

For all he knew, his brother could have died tragically. Rather than voice his real feelings, he makes a protest in the name of justice. But justice is not the point. According to Jewish law, the eldest brother always inherited two thirds of the property. His brother had received only half of what he would receive later on – and the older brother had a rather nasty mind. There is no mention of harlots until he makes the hint. Maybe he suspects his brother of sins he would like to commit, given half the chance. And obviously his service to his father was one of duty rather than of love. The saddest line in the story is that “he refused to go in” to the feast. I wonder if the father eventually coaxed him to go in? But notice here, as in the case of the younger son, it is the father who takes the initiative!

Most of us will discover God mainly through his forgiveness. God uses even sin to draw us closer to him! Remember the story of the woman who washed Jesus’ feet during a meal? Jesus said to the wondering Simon the Pharisee, “Simon, she must have been forgiven much to have loved much.”

Fr Graham’s Lenten Tips

- The sacrament of penance is not going to help your relationship with God if I just rattle off a list of sins. The *reasons* for your sins are more important than the sins themselves
- Visit, call, text, or Facebook someone you may need to reconcile with
- Explore St Ignatius’ Examen Prayer (eg, listen to Fr Timothy Gallagher’s 8-part free podcast at tinyurl.com/bvskyp9)

Reflection Questions:

1. *Have you ever thought that God is continually searching for you, that his greatest joy is that you are “at home with him?”*
2. *How does this parable change your attitude to the Sacrament of Reconciliation?*

Sr Hilda's Spiritual Direction

Our Gospel reading starts with the words, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2) which is why Jesus told his parable about the father who had lost his son.

I remember talking to a man – let's call him "Alan." His son, whom I will call "Mark", was with him; he would have been in his thirties at the time. Mark had been thrown out of every pub and club in the district. He was a troubled lad for a number of reasons and a constant source of anxiety for his parents and family.

His father was forever trying to find ways of improving the quality of his life, always bailing him out of his various scrapes. His only reward seemingly was a consistent tirade of verbal abuse from Mark and the constant worry that when he and his wife were gone, life would be a very uncertain quantity for this wayward son of theirs.

As Alan and I spoke, the lad caught sight of a pile of old tree trunks that had enormous possibility for his embryonic firewood business. He called out to ask me if he might have them. "Of course,"

I replied though I did wonder how he would ever get them out of the gully. No sooner had the thought crossed my mind then Mark called out to his father, "Hey dad, can we get these out?"

The voice held me, it was the unconscious voice of perhaps an eight year-old child who was very used to asking his father for help and held every expectation of a positive response. He was not disappointed this time either.

There was a split second of silence and I saw something I will never forget. I saw a look of utter tenderness wash over Alan's weather-beaten face and I knew he was remembering his *little boy*, who was still *his little boy*. For just a milli-second he was lost in his memories and in his love. There was an almost undetectable quiver in the slow drawl that answered Mark softly, "Oh yeah, we'll get the tractor."

God is like that with you and me – that look of love goes over his face too when you and I are at our most sinful, lowest and grottiest level. The heart of God is lost when he looks at us. In this third week of Lent, let's go searching for that *look of love* in our regard. I promise you will find it and in perhaps the most unexpected of ways.

Reflection Questions:

1. *Unconditional love is not the same as being a doormat for others. How are we called to love like the Prodigal Father?*
2. *When have you experienced "that look of love?"*
3. *If God (and he does) looks into your face, what do you want him to see?*

Closing Prayer (Sung)

Leader: Faithful Father

All: Draw me close to you.

Leader: Lord, forgive me

All: In your merciful love.

Leader: Loving Father

All: Draw me close to you.

Leader: Lord, embrace me

All: In your merciful love.

All: Lord, I believe.

Lord, I believe.

Lord, I believe!

Leader: God of mercy,

All: Purify my heart.

Leader: Come and bathe me

All: In your merciful love.

Leader: Wash and cleanse me

All: Purify my heart.

Leader: Come and save me

All: In your merciful love.

All: Lord, I believe.

Lord, I believe.

Lord, I believe.

Mantra (Sung)

All: I believe. (repeats)

*Next week's readings: Isaiah 43:16-21;
Psalm 125; Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11*

