

GOSPEL

LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32

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. 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 property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 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; and no one gave him anything. 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. 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 sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." 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; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'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 slaves and asked what was going on. 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 in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 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!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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."'

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

During this Lenten journey we are presented with a familiar parable: the merciful Father, featuring a father with his two sons. The story highlights some features of this father who is a man always ready to forgive and to hope against hope. Especially striking is the father's tolerance before the younger son's decision to leave home: he could have opposed it, knowing that he was still immature, a youth, or sought a lawyer not to give him his inheritance, as the father was still living. Instead, he allows the son to leave, although foreseeing the possible risks. God works with us like this: He allows us to be free, even to making mistakes, because in creating us, He has given us the great gift of freedom. It is for us to put it to good use. This gift of freedom that God gives us always amazes me!

But the separation from his son is only physical; for the father always carries him in his heart; trustingly, he awaits his return; the father watches the road in the hope of seeing him. And one day he sees him appear in the distance (cf. v. 20). But this means that this father, every day, would climb up to the terrace to see if his son was coming back! Thus the father is moved to see him, he runs toward him, embraces him, kisses him. So much tenderness! And this son got into trouble! But the father still welcomes him so.

The father treated the eldest son the same way, but as he had always stayed at home, he is now indignant and complains because he does not understand and does not share all that kindness toward his brother that had wronged. The father also goes to meet this son and reminds him that they were always together, they share everything, one must welcome with joy the brother who has finally returned home.

And this makes me think of something: When one feels one is a sinner, one feels worthless, or as I've heard some — many — say: 'Father, I am like dirt', so then, this is the moment to go to the Father. Instead, when one feels righteous — 'I always did the right thing ...' —, equally, the Father comes to seek us, because this attitude of feeling 'right', is the wrong attitude: it is pride! It comes from the devil. The Father waits for those who recognize they are sinners and goes in search of the ones who feel 'righteous'. This is our Father!

The figure of the Father in the parable reveals the heart of God. He is the Merciful Father who, in Jesus, loves us beyond measure, always awaits our conversion every time we make mistakes; he awaits our return when we turn away from him thinking, we can do without him; he is always ready to open his arms no matter what happened. As the father of the Gospel, God also continues to consider us his children, even when we get lost, and comes to us with tenderness when we return to him. He addresses us so kindly when we believe we are right. The errors we commit, even if bad, do not wear out the fidelity of his love. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we can always start out anew: He welcomes us, gives us the dignity of being his children and tells us: "Go ahead! Be at peace! Rise, go ahead!"

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Spend some time reflecting on the actions and attitude of the Father. What affirms you and what challenges you?
- The Father celebrates transformation, repentance and renewed relationship — quite the opposite of the older son. What do you celebrate, how is it part of your life?
- What might be areas of your life where you need to feel God, as Father, rushing out to meet, embrace and welcome you home?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.