

Homily 4th Sunday in Lent (Laetare JOY Sunday) 2025

I once knew a man whose son had cheated him out of an extortionate amount of money. The son had disappeared for years, without even a phone call or a letter. As the father grew older and frailer as the years passed, he became bedridden. On the brink of death, as the family gathered round him, there was a knock on the door. To their amazement and horror, the wayward son appeared. When dad heard his unmistakable voice, he called out, 'Andrew, it's you my son, come here close to me.' and he threw his arms around his boy, sobbing tears of joy. This very human father was so elated, joyful and happy at the return of his son and he showered him with unqualified love and affection, forgetting any past hurts.

My favourite Gospel Story is today's Gospel, the parable of the Prodigal Son and it's this sole Reading from Holy Scripture I want to focus on. It's very important, to fully appreciate and understand the parable, that we are aware of the context in which the story was told. Jesus was sought out by tax collectors and sinners and was keeping their company. The Pharisees and scribes were murmuring and gossiping that this so-called rabbi welcomed and ate with cheats and prostitutes. Jesus, hearing their complaints, relates to them the story of The Prodigal Son.

To ask a father for inheritance before he died was akin to saying, 'I wish you were dead, dad.' It added insult to injury to then openly pack your bags, take the money and set off to a place unknown. The son's actions were cruel, unfeeling and selfish and their callous nature would have brought shame and dishonour on the entire family. In 'the far-off land' the boy, surrounded by 'good time Harrys', squanders his inheritance in 'drunken orgies', such was his lack of respect for his father. As the money began to dry up, so did his circle of friends, and he found himself increasingly downtrodden and alone, yet even at this point he hadn't even a thought for his father who was worried sick about what might have befallen his son.

Eventually, the boy becomes destitute and, in his desperation, accepts a job feeding the swine. This was the lowest of the low places to which the boy could have stooped. Pigs for the Jews were unclean animals and to have to tend them and eat their slops was to have reached rock bottom, literally 'scraping the bottom of the barrel'. The boy even at this point shows no sorrow or even remorse. He doesn't reflect on what a selfish, ungrateful, sinful fool he has been but only thinks of himself and how he can cunningly reinstate himself, not in his father's affections but, in the comfort of his father's estate as a paid servant. 'I will go home and ask to become one of the hired servants.'

Selfish to the last he sets off home. However, Jesus explains, 'Whilst he is a long way off, his father sees him and runs to him, embraces him and calls the servants to put sandals on his feet, a ring on his finger and to prepare the "fatted calf" for a celebratory feast' For an old person to bare his legs and run was considered undignified by the Jews but the ageing father only cares about welcoming his son home and his love for him is reckless. Giving the ring to the son, the father bestows renewed trust and authority and reinstates his son fully into the family's operations and decisions. Sandals were as sign of both homecoming and legalising the son's

renewed claim to the father's estate. To kill the "fatted calf" is a symbol of celebratory abundance, representing God's joy over the repentance of sinners. The father is not only reckless in his love unconditional in his forgiveness.

The other children of the man I knew were very much like the older brother in the parable of The Prodigal Son, angry at the reckless and generous love of their dad. They objected to their dad's joyful reaction to the appearance of his cheating son and especially just before he died. They contested his rights to any part of the inheritance and were jealous and condemnatory of their 'thieving and lying' brother. They openly criticised him, calling him a 'criminal'. All this time the dad was just OVERJOYED that 'this son of mine was dead and now he is alive, was lost and now he is found.'

It's that unconditional reckless love of the father which makes this my favourite Gospel story, **a love even more perfect than the love of the man in my story**. Jesus himself reminds us of this, 'If you, then, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give you good gifts!' (Mt 7:11). What cause for great JOY, that our 'Abba' (Daddy) in heaven treats us so mercifully.