

Sermon Lent 4 Year C 2025

On this fourth Sunday of Lent, we hold up for our consideration the image of mothering and motherhood on this so-called 'Mothering Sunday'. We recall and give thanks for our earthly mothers, for those who have acted for us in a motherly way. We also recall and give thanks for our Holy Mother the Church. And for the Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary. In short, in some small way we celebrate today those things which - as people of faith - we recognise give us life, which nurture us and help sustain us. Our earthly mothers, our mother the church, and Blessed Mother becoming for us, if you like, *icons* of life-giving and nurture.

By some unfortunate alignment, however, the gospel reading placed before us today for this fourth Sunday in Lent doesn't give much space to any of those themes! Instead of images of mothers and motherhood, we have a story of a father and sons and brothers! (I daren't venture a feminist critique on this point!...)

But even as our early mothers, our mother the Church, and the Blessed Mother each in different and unique ways propose for us an image – icons - of life-giving and nurture, the gospel text we have heard this morning likewise proposes an icon, an image. The great bishop Robert Barron, the so-called 'bishop of the internet' (but actually the bishop of Winona-Rochester in the United States) has said this, *'In considering Jesus' parable of the prodigal son we are on interesting ground, for we are dealing with an icon of the Father by the one who is himself the icon of the Father.'*

'We are dealing with an icon of the Father by the one who is himself the icon of the Father...' Christ, in his life, passion, death and resurrection reveals to us the very face of God. In looking to Jesus, we see that that face reveals to us the God of love and mercy. And it is precisely love and mercy that we see shine through in the picture story presented to us in the gospel today.

The love of father in the well-known parable is seen in a number of ways. Importantly, and perhaps most strikingly, it is seen in *the freedom* he grants his younger son. The son is seen to have the freedom to insult his father. The freedom to squander his inheritance. The freedom to make a grave (and indeed potentially fatal) mistake. The freedom to be selfish and entitled. The freedom to break all familial bonds. We can perhaps overlook the gravity and seriousness of the boy's actions. In our cultural context we are sort of used to the idea of rebellious children. We almost now expect it. We can see the lad as some sort of 'wayward youth'. Today we might even excuse him, say 'it is part of growing up. He's pushing the boundaries and that's what all young people do.' But such an approach fails to recognise the cultural context – still alive in many places around the world today – of honour of parents. A principle so important it is reckoned (need I remind you) as one of the Ten Commandments.

But because God's law is now so remote to the ordering of most people's lives means we can overlook and even dismiss the seriousness of what the boy enacts. But so serious are his actions we can rightly understand him as lost. A lost boy. A lostness which cuts him off from family, safety, health, future prospects. Hope, even. But a lostness *he has chosen*. And indeed, as the story unfolds, his predicament is exactly the result of what he has chosen. But it is precisely this choice that reveals the father's love.

The freedom to choose - or 'free will' - is amongst the first things we want to assert theologically, and anthropologically. In other words, an understanding of free will says something both about God and about us. It is, if you like, part of the DNA of the Christian story. And it is the startling insight of the Genesis account of creation. Our first parents are created in freedom. They have the freedom to choose the life and future God has proposed for them. They have the freedom to accept the parameters in which this life and future can be exercised. Or they can choose to reject that life and those parameters. As we know, the tragic story of humankind is that they choose to reject these.

But the radical insight of Genesis is not just what it reveals about the human heart. The radical insight is also what it reveals about God. Namely, that God *creates us in love*. We are made in love. We are made *for* love. How this shows itself is precisely in our freedom, in the freedom to choose. A true love is one which accepts risk, indeed the risk of rejection. Because true love - a love born in freedom - cannot force or coerce or compel.

Now, if the gospel parable today proposes an icon of true love - a love of freedom - we also know how we can operate out of *a false image of love*. And this false image, this false icon of love, so often speaks of love as control or manipulation or even force. Without too much of mental effort we can imagine how this false love shows itself. And so many countless intimate relationships are captured to this false image. But God's love - in fact no true love - will show itself by force or control or manipulation.

So, this important story places before us an image, an icon, of God's love. The God who creates us in freedom. A freedom to choose him or reject him. The hard truth is to own up for ourselves to the depravity and selfishness the boy in the story shows. And it is because of our rejection of God's love, the rejection which results in our own lostness, that we hear this story now, as we make our way to Holy Week. Because in the cross we see the *cost* of love, the cost of our rejection of God, the cost of our lostness. Such is the damage our lostness causes, there is no remedy we can concoct. But such is the love of God that *he* provides the remedy, *he* provides the way back.

In the gospel story we rightly see an image - an icon - of God's love. But it is in the returning, in the way back, that we also rightly see an icon of God's mercy. Mercy understood as an underserved gift. The father's response to the returning son we can see as one of tenderness, compassion, generosity. An unusual and undeserved response. Exuberant, even. But this aspect of exuberance is also what we see in the two parables that immediately precede what we hear today: the parable of the lost coin and the lost sheep. The response in both of these stories is also over the top. The shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to find the one lost is reckless. But then he calls a party when it is found. The woman who turns her house upside down and then also calls a party in response to finding one coin, is also reckless, also exuberant.

And so too the father on the return of his lost son. He doesn't slap the boy (as might be our response!) on his return. He doesn't give him a lecture on recklessness and irresponsibility. He doesn't send him out to work to pay his way back. He welcomes him in mercy. He calls a party. He restores his status as 'son'. Truly, an underserved gift.

Now, the father in the parable is not put to us a parenting model! Remember, this is put to us a sort of icon of God the Father. Precisely the Father who, in the sending of us his Son to redeem the world, was likewise somewhat reckless. At this point it may be good to remember that an image - an icon - may *point* us to the reality, may in some way reflect the reality, but is not the reality itself. In this, the icon of God as seen in Jesus goes so much further than what is proposed in the parable. In the story, the father *waits* for his son. But in Jesus, the *living* icon, the *true* icon, we see God not passively waiting but actively stepping out. In Jesus we see God not waiting for our return, but providing the way to return.

Yes, we might say the Incarnation of the Son of God was daring and reckless. But we might *not* say it was excessive, because that is exactly what was needed! But it was so uncharacteristic of all previous images of God. And to this day, no other religious tradition comes close to the solution of the human predicament. The icon, the image of God revealed in Jesus, remains unique. And this uniqueness, of course, further revealed in the supreme depth of God's love in the cross.

When we speak of the God of love and mercy, we mean something particular. It is, if you like, part of the 'technical language' of our faith. But these ideas are not based on some pious sayings, or even some compelling story. We can say God is a God of love and mercy *with confidence* because that is what the living icon of God - Jesus Christ - has revealed to us. The invitation is for them to become alive in us as well. Amen.