

Conference on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Divine Mercy Sunday, 2019

So I say to you, there shall be joy before the angels of God upon one sinner doing penance. And he said: A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father: Father, give me the portion of substance that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his substance. And not many days after, the younger son, gathering all together, went abroad into a far country: and there wasted his substance, living riotously. And after he had spent all, there came a mighty famine in that country: and he began to be in want. And he went and cleaved to one of the citizens of that country. And he sent him into his farm to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And returning to himself, he said: How many hired servants in my father's house abound with bread, and I here perish with hunger! I will arise and will go to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee. I am not worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And rising up, he came to his father. And when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion and running to him fell upon his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him: Father: I have sinned against heaven and before thee I am not now worthy to be called thy son. And the father said to his servants: Bring forth quickly the first robe and put it on him: and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it: and let us eat and make merry: Because this my son was dead and is come to life again, was lost and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field and when he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said to him: Thy brother is come and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe. And he was angry and would not go in. His father therefore coming out began to entreat him. And he answering, said to his father: Behold, for so many years do I serve thee and I have never transgressed thy commandment: and yet thou hast never given me a kid to make merry with my friends. But as soon as this thy son is come, who hath devoured his substance with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. But he said to him: Son, thou art always with me; and all I have is thine. But it was fit that we should make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead and is come to life again; he was lost, and is found. (Lk. 15:10-32.)

At the first reading, and maybe the fifth or the 17th reading, one could easily focus on the parable as being about sins. But the emphasis is on the father. The parable unveils the heart of God; how God feels towards sinners.

It does not coddle, or excuse the son. It does not say "Oh everyone has their bad moments, it is okay, just forget about it." The Prodigal exploded in rebellion. He knew what he wanted. He fell into a certain slavery to his desire and that slavery led him to gamble everything in getting what God had explicitly condemned. He loved sin. He loved the allure of it, and it promised great satisfaction to his appetites and his desires. He was lured by the promises of sin. He was fascinated with it (Latin *fascinare*; mesmerized, chained).

This is the story of a young man who rebels against his father. He is dissatisfied with his father's provision, and the restrictions, rules and guidance of his father. The rebellion is total. The rejection of the father and the goodness of home were total. Nothing was halfway about his rebellion.

But the elder son liked it at home. Not that he had any love for the father – that is missing from the parable; we detect nothing of love in him for his father. Like most human beings, he wants things to go his way. You get the feeling that he loved himself too much to be interested in pleasing anyone except himself. The guiding star for him was not the Star of Jacob, it was the fallen star of pride born of self-conceit, and self-delusion.

These give us a good picture of what sinful man is – someone victimized by sin, someone deluded and deceived by sin, someone rebelling against the loving restraint of his father. It is at the same time a great illustration of a loving God who waits for the return of the prodigal with love and immense patience.

So the story is about two wayward sons. Sons. Not servants. This then is a story about us.

The far country. It is far, but not measured by distance. It is the state of mortal sin. It is any place where a man is away from God. It is a place without God or forgetful of God. Wherever someone lives that is not in fellowship or friendship with God is a far country. It is a place where you and I do not belong. It is a place where one seeks to please himself. That is part of the essence of the far country – a place where we go to please ourselves.

There is a fairly thorough description of the two sons in the parable. I say the two sons but we could just as well say the two prodigals.

The Younger Prodigal:

Father give me...
gathering all together, went abroad into a far country
and there wasted his substance, living riotously
After he had spent all
There came a mighty famine in that country
and he began to be in want
And he sent him into his farm to feed swine
And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks the swine did eat
and no man gave unto him

The Older Prodigal:

And he was angry
and would not go in
His father therefore coming out began to entreat him
Behold, for so many years do I serve thee and I have never transgressed thy commandment:
and yet thou hast never given me a kid to make merry with my friends.
But as soon as this thy son is come (notice, this thy son – not my brother)
who hath devoured his substance with harlots

We can see ourselves in every single line. We have all been prodigal with the Father's gifts. We have all received from him, yet it is easy to live as if Christ never died, with ourselves at the center, away; far away from the compassionate loving hearth and home of the Father.

There are many roads leading to the far country.
For the younger Prodigal:

That he is lost is obvious. It becomes obvious even to him.
That he is not at home; he is in a far country.
That he is not a worker; he is a waster.
That he is not lifting up but dragging down.
That he is not creating; he is destroying.

Why did he go into the far country? One reason. He left to please himself. He was so intent on pleasing himself that he had no thought for any loss or pain that might come to himself or anyone else. And a life dedicated to self-pleasing is almost a definition of sin.

But how expensive is it! Nothing can be quite as expensive as self-pleasing. Anyone that is bent on self-pleasing is doomed to pay a terrible price. And like the Hebrews in the desert, who made a golden calf as their image of God, so can we make an image of self-pleasing and begin to worship it (worship; Anglo-Saxon for giving worth to a thing). But this god, this image, will hurt the man who worships it. It will also hurt others. No man has ever sinned who has not wounded someone else. What did it cost him?

Fellowship with his father and all the joys of home.

Freedom. And what an irony is this, given that one of the reasons he rebelled was to be free. "Give me!" he said to his father in the hour of his self will. And when his heart was broken he said "Make me!"

His dignity by the doing of a sordid task, twice as ugly since he was a Jew.

It cost him everything. He spent all he had on harlots.

When he reached the far country, he wasted his substance with riotous living. The word riotous here means without saving. He took the gifts and spent them with no provision for leaner days and for the needs of his life or anyone else's.

And what did he waste? His substance. But that was given to him by his father. He wastes God's substance. He joins himself to a citizen of the far country – citizen, not a friend – who gives him a job feeding pigs. The younger son thus prolongs his degradation, and deepens it.

And no man gave unto him. The only interest a citizen of the far country has in him is as a kind of human machine to feed pigs. Everybody for himself in the far country. If he fails, well, let him die. The far country will give nothing, will have no pity, no sympathy, no help, no compassion.

The older son has an attitude that tells us that his years of obedience were without love, just a grim and perfunctory obedience. He too has an utter lack of sympathy. The best he can do for his brother is to call him "your son." And there is a meanness there. There is no mention

of harlots until he mentions them. You have the feeling that he accuses his brother of sins he would have liked to commit.

And so he is usually not counted as lost, either by himself or others. He isn't in a far country but he is just as lost. He had some virtues, this is clear, since he was a worker and not a waster. He resisted temptation to go the route of his brother. He had not shamed his father. He was industrious and thrifty, and despised laziness. There is no scandal about him; no gambling, no lawlessness, no immorality, and was entitled to all the credit that was due to him.

But notice how he misses all the good qualities in his father's life. He cannot grasp the father's patience, forbearance, and grief over the younger brother's absence. His heart is frozen to this compassion. So when the son returns, he has no joy either for his father or for his younger brother.

And notice the seven deadly sins here. Of those sins, four are of the mind, and three are of the flesh. These are listed in order. The first four, the most grievous, overcame the older son: pride, covetousness, envy and anger. The younger son was overcome by the sins of the flesh: lust, gluttony and sloth. The sins of the mind are more insidious, and easily deceive the public, which perceives them as harmless or even desirable. Sinners who fall into them are very hard to awaken to a realization that these are sinful.

Thus, both sons revolted against the father, the younger from parental authority, and the older from parental love. They both wanted the same thing, to have their own way.

But the younger son discovers he has been deceived. The far country made much promise like cotton candy, which looks pretty but just disappears when you put it into your mouth. It gives no nourishment. Sin had distorted the sight of the younger son, and clouded his mind. The deadly sins are a kind of insanity. And the same irrationality characterizes the older brother.

As long as a man is away from God, he is not really himself. He is only himself when he is on his way home. And while the older brother never came back, the younger did. He began by God's grace to realize his desperate condition. He says "My father" and the memory of better times came to him.

"I perish with hunger." There is a confession that has been tearfully made throughout the centuries. You meet it everywhere. It's in the Church and outside the Church. Rich or poor, famous or obscure, so many have tried to satisfy themselves with the husks of swine.

But he also recognizes that the father is sufficient, saying to himself that the hired hands of his father have more than enough food. And so he becomes determined to go back to his father. So what did he say?

It wasn't "I will arise and reform." Reforming one's life is a good thing, but it is not enough. He doesn't say "I'll join the Church." Well, entering the Church is wonderful. We are all for

it. But that isn't enough. He doesn't say "I will arise and go to work." Well, it's about time we would say, and that is a good intention. But that is not enough. No, what he says is, "I will arise and go to my father."

And when he arrives, his father saw him, had compassion on him, loved him, ran to him, and was eager to restore him what had been lost, and fell on his neck and kissed him. In response to this the son makes his confession. He was forgiven, but he still had to confess. This is not a Protestant story. It is not forgiveness given with confession skipped. This is the real spirit of repentance. God forgives, and forgets once we are absolved. As it is written in the 102nd Psalm, "For according to the height of the heaven above the earth: he hath strengthened his mercy towards them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our iniquities from us."

But we do not forget.

And the result of the forgiveness? The more the younger son knows of his father's love, the more he grieves ever sinning against that love.

The way he knows the father's love is through the difference between the way a slave or hired servant was treated at that time and the way a son was treated. A slave was a kind of member of the family, but the hired servant is lower than the slave and can be dismissed at a moment's notice. The hired servant is not a member of the family at all. So when he came home, it is as though his father never gave him the chance to be a servant. Instead he gives his son a robe, a ring and sandals.

In the literary sense of scripture, these are marks of bringing someone up out of destitution. This is a great kindness in itself. But in the fuller sense of scripture, the robe symbolizes honor, the ring symbolizes authority – like a signet ring gives someone our durable power of attorney – and the shoes symbolize son-ship, for children of a family wore shoes and slaves largely went barefoot.

And these gifts go even deeper, as the robe is the father's answer to "I have sinned." The ring is the answer to "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." The sandals are the answer to "Make me one of your hired servants."

We are not told about what happened next. We wonder about the hard work which must follow the restoration, and what temptations the younger son suffered after the restoration. For the enemy will come back and tries again to turn the son from the father and his true home. And perhaps one of the greatest temptations to follow would be to stop being the prodigal son, without turning into the elder brother.

But I think we can doubt that the younger son fell away again, because of the nature of his repentance. For where did the real repentance take place? Was it in the pigsty? Or was it in the father's arms?

I think it was in the father's arms. The son was sorry before, to be sure. But now that he is in the father's arms, now he really becomes aware of the stench, and loathes what he has done. But he is in an embrace, unable to escape the love of his father. And if he had composed

some eloquent speech for this moment, surely the words would have failed. The stench would have been a thousand times worse in his father's arms. And a million times better.

So in this one, simple, eloquent story, our good Lord sewed together some of the greatest of all the mysteries of our faith; viz., justice, penalty, mercy, and their union. They are all here. To explain how, on this wonderful feast of Low Sunday – where every text of the propers of the Mass are in perfect harmony with the feast of the Divine Mercy – I turn to the work of an unknown Carthusian monk.

1. Justice. According to a remark of St. Augustine, the loveliness of order is so great that the ugliness of sin cannot endure for a single moment without being repaired by the beauty of punishment. Sovereign justice has its rights, which are imprescriptible. It incessantly adjusts, and cannot exist without adjusting, the activity of free creatures to eternal order. If I do well, it immediately answers my action with rewards of merit. In proportion as I glorify God, I enter into participation of the beatitudes of time and of eternity. If I do evil, and if I rob God of the glory which is His due, justice immediately punishes me for the violation of order; I become subject to penalties to the extent in which I have fallen into iniquity. Justice, then imposes penance upon me as an expiation of the disorder of my life.

2. Penalties. But why does justice have recourse to suffering as an expiation for sin? The movement that turns me away from God is a false impulse towards pleasure in creatures; and it is because I desire to enjoy unduly that I deserve to be brought back to order by chastisement. Evil is corrected by its opposite. So far as I turn away towards irregular delights, so far shall I have to undergo torments. This is the law of time, and it is the law of eternity. Such are the demands of justice, which exactly counterbalances the pleasures of sin with the pains of its punishment; so that the injury inflicted upon the divine glory by enjoyment is repaired by suffering. "Man always in the end pays God what he owes Him," says St. Augustine again. "If he does not say it by doing what he ought, he pays it by suffering as he ought; hence, in one way or another, his debt is paid." And justice will never let anyone off paying the uttermost farthing. It can no more do away with a penalty that I can do away with a merit. Its inexorable function is to adjust, and it always exactly adjusts merits and demerits.

3. Mercy. But God is not only one-handed. All the ways of the lord are mercy and truth, as written in the 24th Psalm. If He has a hand of strict justice, which is inflexible in its adjustments, He has also a gentle hand of mercy, which is supremely supple in its kindly dispositions: if it be the mission of justice to ensure the reparation of the essential order of the divine glory, it is the lot of mercy to repair the soul itself. Its part is to raise up what is fallen, to make good what has been destroyed, and to restore what is lost. God willed to show man mercy, whilst He only did justice to the angels. He did not repair the angels, but He has repaired man. And for this restoration mercy has its kindly dispositions, its delicate invitations, and its infinitely adorable discoveries of goodness. If nothing deceives justice, nothing tires mercy. The latter is as unrelaxing in its benevolence as the former in its strictness.

4. Their union. And according to God's designs with regard to mankind, His two hands are destined to cross each other constantly over the head of the sinner. The blessings of mercy are intended to harmonize with the severities of justice. God desires that mercy and

truth should always be meeting within me, and that justice and peace should always be embracing. And it is just on the ground of penance that the meeting and embracing occur. Justice will relax none of its penalties but mercy takes up these very penalties, and renders them reparatory of my life, and meritorious of a better life. At the same time as I discharge the debts of justice, my being raised once more to the heights from which it had fallen.

Thus every sin demands a penalty, and every penalty is first of all vindicatory, for such are the requirements of justice; and, then, it is remedial, for such at least are the intentions of mercy.

I cannot withdraw from the requirements of justice, but I am able not to correspond with the intentions of mercy. And if, as one of the damned, I undergo, in spite of myself, the penalty of justice, my penance is sterile so far as I am concerned, since it does not make good the degradations of my life. when on the contrary, by my free concurrence, I adapt myself to redemptive designs, my penance becomes both expiatory and reparatory, it satisfies God and purifies my being, it takes away the evil and builds up the good, it discharges debts and creates merits.

5. Redemption. But an intervention of incomprehensible love was further necessary to facilitate the encounter and embrace of justice and mercy. It is in the Person of the Redeemer that this wonder came about, and it was fulfilled on the Cross. God became man, and He came to undergo in His human flesh the trials of life and the torments of death, sanctifying both the one and the other, and by the merit of His divinity imparting to the one and to the other an infinite value for expiation and reparation. "He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrow. He was wounded for our iniquities, He was bruised for our sins: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His bruises we are healed" (Is. 53: 4,5) Hence, it is His Cross that imparts to penalties their true expiatory value and reparatory power.

He has amassed an infinite treasure, and this treasure, from the point of view of its application, has been still further expanded by the merits of the Virgin of Sorrows, and of the martyrs and saints. There is enough to discharge all the debts of justice and to secure the triumph of mercy for all the souls of all the centuries.

This Redeemer, in Whose Presence we now are, will shortly condescend to come physically closer to us in the monstrance. Difficult as it may be, may each of us here this afternoon, allow Him to embrace us by His Divine Presence, and allow the hidden rays of His mercy to expiate all the wrong we ever did.

NB. These thoughts came from some notes I took from some lectures and articles which I can't recall, so please don't think that they are entirely mine. And the book from which I quoted the Carthusian is called The Interior Life, Simplified to Its Fundamentals. The author is unknown, but the foreword was written by Fr. Joseph Tissot.