

Homily for Saturday in Lent II
February 27, 2016 Micah 7:14–15, 18–20
Psalm 103:1–4, 9–12 Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

I have just read the most famous of Jesus' parables. We know it as the parable of the prodigal son. This is an apt title. The word "prodigal" means "to waste". As the story so clearly shows, this son did waste the inheritance that was his. Jesus puts it vividly when he summarizes his actions this way:

"He squandered his property on loose living."

And while this parable is about this loose living son, it is far more than that. It is not only the parable of the prodigal younger son, it is also the parable about the prideful older son and patient father.

I want to suggest to you that this parable has a particular immediacy for us today. We live at a time culturally where there are so many living prodigious lives. One of the ways our time has been described is:

The era of the autonomous self.

Such autonomy is represented in the son's request to his father:

Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.'

Notice his emphatic attitude and demanding tone. There are so many people today who are living with a willful attitude choosing to turn away from God – or never having been introduced to him conclude there is no God. This finds a particular expression among younger people who, in increasing numbers claim to be atheists. One of the consequences of such autonomy is that lives become conformed to the spirit of the age. This is described in the passage by the son hiring himself out to a swineherd. There was nothing more degrading for a good Jewish boy to do than to feed swine. Not only that, he is so hungry he would even eat the pig's food.

There are so many people today who have lost all sense of their God given dignity because they are so conformed to the spirit of the age that celebrates licentious and riotous living free from all constraints.

At such a time we need to be careful that as followers of Jesus Christ that we do not cultivate the attitude of the prideful older brother. It is so easy to be shocked by all that is happening morally in our culture that we adopt an attitude that is judgmental and condemnatory captured in this indictment of the older brother.

But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!'

Notice that when the prideful son, who has served his father grudgingly, gets news of the prodigal's return he disowns his brother by referring to him as "this son of yours". We can hear

the contempt in his voice. Such contempt is something we have to guard ourselves against. How do we do this? By contemplating to patience of the waiting father.

St. John Paul II has said the Church can never impose but only propose. In other words we cannot tell people how to live but always be there waiting for some to come to their senses so that we can enter into relationship with them. This requires the virtue of patience, a word that means “long suffering”. Think of this father’s long suffering love. Waiting and waiting for the prodigal to return. And when he does we are told that rather than condemning the boy, like the older brother, the father has compassion on him. This word compassion is used in two other places in Luke’s Gospel. Once, when Jesus encounters a widow weeping over her dead son; the other time is in the story of the Good Samaritan, who on seeing a man mugged we are told had compassion on him.

Here is the third use of the word. This verb compassion is similar to what is expressed in modern language as a feeling in one’s “gut” or “heart” of deep empathy for another person. Jesus expresses compassion vividly. We see the father running to his son, kissing and embracing him.

Pride leads to judgment, patience leads to compassion. As we journey towards the cross, may we reflect on the patience of the Father, shown in the face of our older brother Jesus and so be ever more conformed to his image and character.