

## Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Feb 27th 2016

The gospel reading for today is a wonderfully familiar passage. We call it the story of the “prodigal son” with the main characters of the tale being a father and his two sons. The younger one gets his father to divide the inheritance between them and then he proceeds to go to a far off country where he squanders the inheritance. After a famine hits the region where the son is, he hires himself out as a farm hand and tends the swine of a prominent citizen of that place. After a while, he sees the folly of his ways and he decides to go back to his father and to confess his waywardness and to throw himself on the father’s mercy. Anything is better than being a waiter for pigs.

How might the father respond? He has already been actively awaiting the son’s return and when he finally sees him he throws a huge feast for the son. And now enter the older of the two boys. This son strongly objects to his father’s generosity towards the prodigal and he complains that the father never acknowledged his own fidelity to his dad.

There is so much for us to contemplate in this familiar story. The one we call the prodigal has grievously offended the father. He effectively says to the father, “I consider you dead, so give me the inheritance that you owe me.” Seeming not to blink, the father gives him what is his inheritance and the son goes off and squanders the inheritance and comes to his senses only when he discovers himself in dire straits.

The father not only forgives, but he is awaiting the son’s return and he greets the son with lavish love and deep compassion. He then proceeds to call for a celebration that honors the “prodigal” and this action infuriates the older brother.

The passage might be more accurately called the “prodigal father” because indeed the father shows incredible lavishness in his treatment of his second born who had basically disowned his father. This is no ordinary father. As Jesus tells the story we see that the father stands for God the Father. The son is the sinner who finally realizes the consequences of actions and is lead to return to the father (God). The brother represents those of us who get stuck in our judgments and in our own goodness. He can’t seem to get past his own faithfulness and he lets the father know about it.

The real message here is the forgiveness and the compassion of the Father who waits for us sinners to come back and the great joy he exhibits on our return. Can I truly believe that I will be received back like the prodigal son? Or, do I expect to be rejected as the older brother treated his wayward sibling?

As hard as it is to imagine and to believe: God rejoices at our return and celebrates it with joyful exuberance. God is indeed the Prodigal Father and I am the beneficiary of that prodigality. For this I am so very grateful.

Tom Shanahan, S.J.\*-Creighton University's University Relations