

Lenten Reflection: The Prodigal Son

‘Two sons, one father, no mother’

With the approach of Lent, I invite you to ponder afresh a classic story of repentance and reconciliation: the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. 11-32ⁱ

‘A man had two sons.’ In the Hebrew Scriptures, the younger son typically emerges as the hero, the favoured one in God’s plan (e.g., think of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau). But what is going on here? It is difficult to see the younger son as having *any* redeeming qualities, even in his decision to return home. For although the Christian reader typically assumes that ‘in coming to his senses’ the son underwent a conversion of heart and sought to reconcile with his father, the text does not say this. Rather, it simply states that he woke up to the fact that he could obtain a better standard of living back home. And his rehearsed ‘homecoming’ speech – does it sound a touch opportunistic? *‘I will say to my father...’* Yes, he will say it, but does he really mean it? And what of the father? Is he such a shining example of parental love? Why do we so readily cast him as a God-figure when he owns slaves, fails to question his son’s selfish demand for an early inheritance, rewards bad behaviour with opulent feasting in a time of famine, and is so besotted by his younger son that he fails to invite his eldest son to the homecoming feast? Is this responsible, loving parenting?

Note, too, the absence of a female character in this story of family dynamics. Our biblical imaginations ask: Where is the wife and mother? Is she dead? Incapacitated? Alienated? Wilfully disengaged? Does the question matter? And what exactly is going on with the elder son? Why does no one bother to send word to him of his younger brother’s homecoming? He becomes aware of it by enquiring of a servant... is that why he describes himself as one of them? And do his father’s words really offer him reassurance? The statement *‘all I own is yours’* is not a grand gesture of

generosity but a simple legal fact: since the younger has already received his inheritance the rest of the estate will one day pass to the elder. Twice the father dramatically likens his younger son’s return as a movement from death to life, yet offers no apology or explanation for failing to communicate with his eldest son about this great family event concerning ‘this brother of yours.’

Our questions and ponderings to this point have taken us along a path quite different to the usual homily. Where do they leave us? A little unsettled? Feeling the rub of familial patterns close to home? Wanting to argue for a different interpretation based on other subtle details in the text? Surely such disturbances are a good thing, for they make us listen more intently to God’s Word, thirsting for real answers and resisting biblical complacency.

There is a Jewish saying that refers to the “seventy faces of Torah;” that is, God’s Word is an inexhaustible mystery that invites many interpretations. Why, then, settle for just one? Certainly, there are well-known interpretations that are favoured and emphasised by our tradition. Yet this does not preclude our prayerful wrestling with the many more insights contained within the parable of the Prodigal Son and the possible interpretations that speak powerfully to our relationship with God and one another. No character in the parable is perfect or one-dimensional. Each is entangled in a complex, fragile, relational matrix that defies simplistic answers... much like our own experience of family life.

Perhaps what is most tantalizing about this parable is how it leads us to wonder: when the party was over, what happened next?

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ⁱ Drawing on commentary from Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and AJ Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (HarperCollins, 2006).