

Encountering the Spirit

Week 4: Home

Opening prayer

O God, who through your Word reconcile the human race to yourself in a wonderful way, grant, we pray, that with prompt devotion and eager faith the Christian People may hasten toward the solemn celebrations to come. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, you Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.
R. Amen.

(Collect for Fourth Sunday of Lent)

Review

Is there anything you would like to share about the previous week?



...may this Synod be a true season of the Spirit! For we need the Spirit, the ever-new breath of God, who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles and spreads joy. The Holy Spirit guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us.

*Address of His Holiness, Pope Francis
for the opening of the Synod
October 2021*

Scripture

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 The prodigal son

(Due to copyright restrictions, we are unable to include this passage and therefore ask that you read from your Bible.)

Reflection



The story of the Prodigal Son is one that has captured the imagination of writers, painters and composers across the centuries. It is both familiar and extraordinary at the same time, always bringing new insights and riches to the pilgrim. In our time in the Lenten wilderness what have we noticed in ourselves that resonates with this parable? It is a story of a sinner, someone just like us, who is in need of compassion and

mercy. God is always seeking us out, ready to say, 'Welcome home'. Reflect for a moment on the sense we experience, when we turn our face once again to the Father, reconciled, forgiven and set upon a new path. It is a parable of conversion.

Do you find that, no matter how many times you return to this passage, it speaks to you anew as your journey evolves? In his very personal account of this parable in *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, Henri Nouwen looks at the story from the perspective of both the sons and the father. The underlying theme is that of homecoming, affirmation and reconciliation. One useful insight that Nouwen provides is to place himself physically into each of the three major parts: as the prodigal son, as the older son, who feels rebellion and resentment despite living in the father's house, and as the father, a spiritual parent.

Continued overleaf

Synodal Pathway

The Synodal Process is first and foremost a spiritual process... It requires us to learn and exercise the art of personal and communal discernment. We listen to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the signs of the times in order to discern what God is saying to all of us. Pope Francis characterises the two interrelated goals of this process of listening: "to listen to God, so that with Him we may hear the cry of His people; to listen to His people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us." (Vademecum 2.2)



Reflection (continued)

We might easily identify with the two sons, but possibly feel a bit challenged at the idea that we too are called not simply to see the action through the eyes of the Father, but to act like the Father. In life this parable is being lived out in the secular and spiritual world and we are likely to have experienced aspects of it in our life of faith, or the practical circumstances of family life.

Estrangements come in many forms, with those whom we love and are given to love, and in our relationship with God. Sometimes we know what the cause was and at other times it is difficult for us to pin down what happened. It just did. This is where we need to be open to the operation of grace. I recall someone who found themselves estranged from their only son for years without any idea why. There was no contact and he yearned to be reunited with his son. One day the son was on the doorstep. The father opened the door, placed his arms around him, embraced him and simply said, 'Let's have a cup of tea'. No explanation was asked for and one was not offered and never has been. The reconciliation was real and lasting: "while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (v. 20).

Importantly, we need to allow ourselves to be loved by the Father first and then extend that unconditional love and favour to others. We are all being called home, to reclaim our place as children of God and to become like the Father, constantly being remade in His image. The inspiration for Nouwen's book was a chance encounter with Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, for many a wonderful prompt to prayer and reflection.

These 'God moments' come in different forms, primarily in the people we meet, but often through unexpected encounter with a piece of art, a landscape or music. At these times we need to sit quietly and allow

the Spirit to reveal what we need to see. It will be transformative and life changing. In her short reflection on Rembrandt's painting in *The Art of Lent*, Sister Wendy Becket reminds us that this is a parable of love, commenting: 'He (the father) is watching out always for this lost child, abundantly ready to lavish upon him the good clothes, the feasting and cherishing, that have been so willfully disregarded.' God also asks us to love always, regardless of the circumstances.

God's mercy and compassion are central to the teaching of Pope Francis. This is reflected in the Jubilee of Mercy in 2016, which emphasised the importance of mercy and the need to 'gaze' on it, asking the Church to 'regard all human problems from the standpoint of God's love, which never tires of welcoming and accompanying'. Speaking at his General Audience in May 2016 Pope Francis said, 'Jesus reminds us that one does not stay in the house of the Father for a reward but because one has the dignity of being children who share responsibility. There is no "bargaining" with God, but rather following in the footsteps of Jesus who gave himself on the Cross without measure'. Quite often we get ourselves into a hole by focusing primarily on our weakness and faults, without remembering the closeness, compassion, and tenderness of God.

On our journey in this life God constantly draws close to us and we need to resist the all too real temptation to flee because we feel unworthy. Can you recall what it felt as a young child when you felt distraught over something you had done, only to then be swept up into the arms of a loving parent? God in his compassion wants to break down every barrier that prevents our being in relationship with Him, including the ones we put up.

By Deacon Roger Carr-Jones

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus
I give you my hands to do your work
I give you my feet to go your way
I give you my eyes to see as you do
I give you my tongue to speak your words
I give you my mind that you may think in me
I give you my spirit that you may pray in me
Above all, I give you my heart
that you may love in me
your Father and all mankind
I give you my whole self that you may grow in me
so that it is you Lord Jesus
who live and work and pray in me. Amen
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QUESTION

How does it feel to know that God is always seeking us out, wanting to know us, love us and be with us?

POINT FOR ACTION

Discerning as a group, from everything you have shared in this time together, what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take as we 'journey together' in our parish, or community and the wider church?

