

**Homily Lent 4 Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2010.**

**Mass Readings: Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32.**

Once, at the end of a school leavers' Mass in a school where I was helping as a chaplain, a mother came to me and asked me to have a word with her son Robert. I knew Robert; he'd left the school two years before. "What's the matter?" I asked her. "Oh, he's just so difficult at the moment. He won't settle to anything, he never listens to me or his father, he's out all night, sleeps late, goodness knows what company he's keeping. He used to be such a contented boy, an altar server you remember, did very well at R.E. He likes you, he might listen to you; he certainly won't listen to us." So, an appointment was made and Robert comes along to the friary, plonks himself in the chair and stares angrily at the ground – hands and feet tapping. "What's up Robert?" I ask. "Oh they're driving me crazy," he says. Mum is always getting on to me about my friends, my room, my clothes. Dad is always saying I should do something responsible blah blah blah."

He talks about how suffocated he feels and about getting away, going to live with friends.

"So why don't you?" I say to him."

"Oh, you know what they're like; they'd be after me every five minutes."

"Robert you're nineteen, just go – they'll be fine." He looks up, wondering. Shouldn't I be backing his Dad up? Yes, but how best to do that? And which Dad? The Dad I needed to back up, I felt, at that moment was the Dad of Luke 15. Most of Luke 15 is all about Dad.

The Dad of Luke 15, who is Jesus' Abba, God the Father, that Dad exemplified in the parable, when the boy comes and asks for his inheritance, says 'OK', 'fine, if that's what you want - go.' The Dad of Luke 15 doesn't try to keep the boy at home. Once it was clear he wanted to break free Dad makes no difficulties. He lets go of the youngest of his treasures. Oh, make no mistake; his heart is breaking inside; his eyes struggling probably to hold back the tears. The boy goes and Dad waits – by the window, by the door, at the gate, every day, every night. He waits. He must have done because he saw the boy returning when he was still a long way off. I love that detail. His eyes had grown tired, for ever searching the approaching lanes and scanning the distant hills for the boy's return. Jesus teaches that His Father has an infinite longing for us.

Dad let him go because he remembers that urgency of needing to have everything now, that often characterises young adulthood. "Give me my inheritance now." He knows also that it doesn't work out quite like that, we have to wait and struggle and go hungry and miss home and get lonely and empty for our deeper self to emerge, or as the parable puts it, come to our senses. So he lets the boy go, precisely so that he can discover that truth for himself. Because, this truth one can only discover oneself. When I first wanted to join the friars I was twenty, and there was a waiting list – can you believe it?! I was told I had to wait nine months! Nine months! I can't wait nine months I thought. God's very wise – men could never do pregnancy! I want to get on, I want to join now! In those nine months I worked with the Cyrenians in their night shelters for homeless people, and through the people I met and through that waiting I had my intentions purified. There are a number of important things for which one has to wait, and

prepare, and go hungry, and mature. That takes distance and it takes time. This is true not only of young adulthood of course. This process accompanies us all through life. It's an element of the desert that we have been thinking of. I can't wait nine months! I want my inheritance now! That's how we are, until we learn something better.

In the desert I may fall, get hurt and hurt other people. I'll be wasteful and selfish maybe, break apart, and then, wonder of wonders, as the youngest son did, I'll come to myself. *He came to his senses* and returned home, but he was very different – more tender, more patient, more humble. He'd gained a new inheritance, better than the family one. He received the desert one. He'd learned what he could never have learned otherwise. He discovered more of who he most deeply can be, and so discovered values he'll be truly responsible for, that's priceless and worthy of his parents' heartache.

Our mission as Catholics is to proclaim that the heart of what the Church celebrates with regard to God's relationship with us and all people is within this beautiful story about mercy, patience and greatness of heart. People tend to believe that the Church is primarily concerned about censure, and the control of people's lives, behaving much more like the aloof elder brother in the parable, standing on the sidelines complaining, than like the lavish father. That's how we can appear if we are not careful. Any institution, and this is true of Religious Orders, the Church and the family – any institution that domesticates its rebels may have gained its peace, but lost its passion and its future. My life and yours must be the clear evidence that God empowers, liberates, and deepens the lives of all who turn to Him. That faith journey may hurt us and cost us but it will also warm, inspire and invite others like the stars shining at night, or like coals glowing in the hearth. Our culture needs radical Christian inspiration.

God is the One who awakens and sets free our passion and hope. This is expressed beautifully I think in one other little detail that I love in the parable. After his return home the father gives his youngest son, fresh clothes, a ring for his finger – and a new pair of sandals. That gesture of giving a new pair of sandals says a lot. It says, "You can go again if you want." Our God sets Himself up to experience loss again and again, that our freedom may be ensured. You know the story of a sheep that found a hole in the fence and crept through it. He was so glad to get away. He wandered far and lost his way back. And then he realised that he was being followed by a wolf. He ran and ran, but the wolf kept chasing him, until the shepherd came and rescued him and carried him lovingly back to the fold. And in spite of everyone's advice to do so, the shepherd refused to nail up the hole in the fence. That's the Dad of Luke 15.

What's there for Robert is in fact offered to all of us. God gives us immense freedom, and He carries the pain and longing of such an offering. He also shares the joy of it with us, but at what a cost! Every time I come up for communion I am asking for my inheritance. Presenting myself for the Eucharist is like saying: "Give me my inheritance now." As a Christian my inheritance is Christ. He chooses to be my inheritance. He is my present and my future. And the Father takes me at my word. He gives me His Son. He places my inheritance into my hands, into my life. His Son gives me all of Himself; and I go off into the day, the evening, into the week, into the rest of my life with this supreme treasure – to do what with it; to live what with it? Do I live the freedom offered to me, courageously? We are offered total freedom to do what we like with His gift of Himself, which He offers us as our inheritance.

How might I be squandering this? There are many ways. Very often it's the simple things that are the most important to watch. If I had to get to an extremely important meeting at eight o'clock with my boss concerning my work, and to be at that meeting I had to get the six o'clock train, I would be at the station in good time. I'd get that train. Five past six and the train would have gone. I wouldn't be late. Jesus deserves my being here on time. If someone very important was coming to dine at my house I'd honour that invitation by cleaning, cooking, tidying, investing heart and mind. Jesus also deserves my attention while He is speaking in the readings, which means my preparation beforehand, being at the penitential rite, and my deliberate and recollected presence while here. What I must always remember when I come to the Sacraments, any of them, is that I'm not coming to a service simply but to a Person. I'm coming to someone who is waiting for me, longing for me to be with Him, has long since seen my approach and is moved to love me and receive me with a tenderness and depth and passion that are unimaginable. He has so much for me to do. I mustn't squander that inheritance.

Whatever happens He'll be here any time I come waiting to receive me, with an open heart, clean clothes, a new ring reminding me of my bond with Him – and a fresh pair of sandals.

The more I get a glimpse of the immense, infinite, cost of that, and the infinite beauty of that, the more I may become like that myself, and that Luke 15 may more and more become the fulcrum around which my own life turns. May it be so for me and for you.