

### **Fourth Sunday of Lent**

I was listening to this gospel with the thought of the millions of people who have been forced to leave their homes and their families in Ukraine. Many of them have been cut off from their homes forever. Here in our gospel is a story of a young man who freely and selfishly cut himself off from his family and his home. And yet it is a story that can help us all to discover anew the God and the family from whom we can never be cut off.

We notice first that the father agrees to give his younger son the property that would have been handed down to him when his father died. The son was treating his father as if he were already dead.

When the younger son uses up all his inheritance, he finds himself at a pig farm. For a young Jewish boy this is the worst possible place to end up. But it is here that he begins to find himself. It is from here that he begins his journey of repentance, his journey back home. But he cannot imagine that he could ever be known as a son again. He practices what he will say to his father when he returns home. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants."

But when he gets near home, his father has been keeping watch for him. Without any concern for his own honour

or dignity the man runs to his son and embraces him. He doesn't give his son the opportunity to say what he had been practising. He doesn't let him entertain the idea of coming back as anything less than a son. He orders a ring and sandals, a robe and a feast to honour him as his son. "This son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found."

The older brother didn't share his father's vision. When his younger brother left home, he ceased to be a member of the family in his brother's eyes. When he learns that his father was putting on a feast to welcome the prodigal back home this is too much for the older brother. He refuses to join in the celebrations.

Once more the father puts aside any thought of honour or dignity, and he leaves the house again and goes to his older son. He begs his son to come and join them. But his older son begins to reveal what has been hidden in his relationship with his father. "Look all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid to celebrate with my friends." This must have hurt the father as much as anything the younger son had done. The older boy saw his relationship with his father as being like that of a slave to a master. And he goes on, "This son of yours," (he can't speak about him as a brother) when he comes back after swallowing up your

property – he and his women – you kill the calf we had been fattening.”

Yet again the father swallows his dignity and explains to his son that he loved him just as much as he loved his younger son. “My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours.” If the older son wanted to have a party he could have just gone ahead and done it, taking out of the wine cellar whatever he needed. But that was not how the son saw it at all.

Again the father reminds his son that it was only right to welcome his brother home because “he was dead and has come back to life, he was lost and is found.”

As we heard that story again today who did we think that we were most like? Perhaps we remembered that we have been like that younger son. We have wandered away from home. We have chosen to distance ourselves from the God who loves us. We have selfishly wasted the gifts that could have been used for others. But perhaps we are remembering today that moment in our lives when we began to find ourselves and started to make our way home. We give thanks to God for that moment.

We too may have thought of ourselves as being unworthy of being called a son or daughter of God. But

we found ourselves embraced by a God whose mercy and forgiveness knew no bounds. We came to know a God who could only see us as the son or daughter that he loves. We came to know a God who restored our dignity no matter how hard we had tried to lose it.

Perhaps there have been times we have identified ourselves with that older brother? Perhaps we have experienced hurt so badly that we felt that we could never forgive the one who hurt us? We have never been able to open our hearts enough to God’s forgiveness so that we had that grace to share with others. We can pray for that grace again today.

Or perhaps we have tried so hard to keep the commandments and do what God calls us to do that we began to resent those who had chosen another path. Perhaps we need to ask God to help us to be able to see our brothers and sisters, no matter what they have done, in the same light as our God sees them? We can all pray for the gift of compassion and for the grace to be more and more like the God who is revealed in today’s gospel. We can ask the God of mercy to open our hearts to that mercy so that we in our turn can be merciful to others.