

Along the track

The Other Son

One of the most memorable characters in Jesus' parables is the elder brother in the story we have come to call The Prodigal Son. He evokes strong emotions, mostly sympathy, sometimes anger but also we are mystified. Why did Jesus include him in this story?

Firstly, the two sons are included in the story to illustrate the love of the father. The story is actually about the father, an image of God that Jesus is trying to illustrate, trying to help us grasp one of the most fundamental things about God the Father. He is indeed a loving and generous character, welcoming his wayward son back with open and loving arms. He kills the fattened calf, hires a band and throws a party.

And he opens those arms to the older son too when he is angered by such a generous welcome to one so undeserving, in his view. He simply won't come inside the home. He is ungracious to say the least, bitter, angry. He has been faithful all these years so in his opinion, he deserves to be rewarded for his loyalty. That is only fair and just! He feels rejected but, as his father points out to him nothing has changed, all I have is yours! "You have always been with me and all I have is yours, but we, you and I, should be happy and dance because your younger brother who was dead has come back to life!" Not fair, says the older brother, not right!

There is a bit of the older brother in all of us. We want to be the judge, to decide who God should welcome to God's home, who God should bless. We want to decide who deserves forgiveness and who doesn't, who deserves what treatment, why and when. In a sense, we make the rules that we think God should abide by. How dare those who do not, in our estimation, deserve such a gift or perhaps be in need of such grace and encouragement. In other words, our anger and our self righteous attitude may mean that we are the ones standing outside the father's house like the older brother, bitter both at God's mercy and at those who are, seemingly without merit, receiving it. It is not enough that eventually the good should have their day. The bad must be positively punished. That's only fair!

The father wants his younger son back, and his older one as well. It is not a story about a good son and a wayward son but a father who asks us to open our arms in welcome, just as he does to all of us. As the late Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical, Fratelli Tutti!

Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all. —Fratelli tutti, §8

We all bring a richness to life in our beliefs and convictions but it does not mean we are always right. Hence this parable which challenges us to rethink, to examine our ways, our attitudes. Of course sometimes it is a struggle to forgive, to try to see the world as this loving father does. We have been treated unfairly, things have not always gone our way when they perhaps should have. We have suffered injustice when others didn't. So do we give way to bitterness and worry that that God might be too lenient, worry that the bad will not be fully punished? Perhaps we should worry more about how we do not see life through the loving eyes of the father in this story, and worry more about our own incapacity to forgive, to let go of our own hurts and to rejoice in the wonder of others why are trying.

So is our problem with the older son not so much that we feel he is being treated unjustly or unfairly but that we have not fully understood that God wants to be very close to us?

By his revelation, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses us as friends, and moves among us, in order to invite us into his own company. Catechism of the Catholic Church #142

And on the other hand,

The desire for God is written in the human heart, because each person is created by God and for God: and God never ceases to draw each person to himself.
Catechism of the Catholic Church #27

That's each person, not just me!

Regards
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