

# Fourth Sunday in Lent

27.03.2022  
By Trevor Williams

## Introduction

The conclusion of last week's reading (Luke 13:1–9) was summed by Jesus saying to those listening 'Unless you repent you will likewise perish'. If this was the final word it would give the impression that God's focus is judgement and punishment. This week's reading is one of the best known passages in the Bible, the story of the prodigal son. We love that story. But it is a story of two halves. There are two sons. The prodigal's brother (the elder son) deserves much closer attention than we feel inclined to give him.

What is your response to the word 'Repent'? Is it a positive response or a largely negative one?

Have you ever thought that repentance is really an invitation to find a new direction towards abundant life, avoiding the calamitous consequences of the direction in which you were heading?

There is much to explore within the familiar words of this wonderful story.

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## Text

### Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place

throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

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## Comment

As thoroughly modern beings, we like to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals who decide what we want, when we want it, and how to get it. René Girard, theologian and philosopher of social science, has made us aware that this is an illusion. We live in relationship to those around us and our desires, attitudes and behaviour are heavily influenced by those relationships. We are constantly influenced by 'the other' and are measuring ourselves against them. We are drawn to those who appear to have more than we do and feel we deserve to have the same. Rivalry can drive us to seek the upper hand, to be better than they are, over and above 'the others'. Rivalry can lead, ultimately, to violence.

The prodigal son lives and works on the family farm with his father and elder brother. But his mind becomes convinced that there must be more, that he is somehow missing out, that this secure home life on his father's farm is in fact a prison, preventing him from fulfilling his dreams. He is in rivalry with an imagined 'good life.' The story is vividly told. He lived 'the dream' for a while but when reality struck home, the dream became a nightmare.

And then, as Jesus tells the story, he 'came to himself'. He decides to return home, and as he had squandered his place in the family with its privileges and inheritance, all he could do was to plead with his father for a position as a 'hired hand'.

Every day the father was on the lookout for his lost son. And one day, there he was, in the distance, returning home. The father runs, put his arms around him and kisses him and puts on a special party to celebrate the return of his beloved son. He is extravagantly reinstated as a full member of the family.

Observing the lavish attention given to his brother, the elder son feels ignored. His father pleads with him to join the party – but the elder son can't stand it and

excludes himself from the celebration. He feels that, by comparison with this prodigal, he is the slave: a non-person, neglected, taken for granted, the lowest of the low. He is in an emotional pigsty. Here is rivalry, with violence of attitude, if not action.

These stories prompt us in many different situations to consider what we 'hope to gain' and 'fear to lose'. The prodigal was led astray by what he hoped to gain. The elder son was consumed with jealousy because of what he feared he had lost. Both were fantasies fuelled by rivalry of 'the other'.

In contrast to these destructive fantasies, it is the loving action of the father that enables new life and new possibilities. The loving of neighbour, the desiring for the other, what we wish for ourselves, and making that possible stands in stark contrast to the dark road that rivalry opens to us.

Repentance is that change of mind, that deciding to follow a new direction that holds open the possibility of new beginnings for us all.

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## Response

Each son's experience interrogates our attitudes and values as individuals and as a society.

Is the aspiration of our consumerist culture not a parallel to the prodigal's quest?

Does not the elder son's jealousy of his brother blind him to all that is good and all he could enjoy?

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## Prayer

God beyond rivalry  
Our desires can lead us astray  
to have more,  
to be more  
to achieve more  
than others.

You have made us and know us

You have made us and know us  
In Christ you walked among us  
Showing a different way.

May the way of the father guide us,  
to support the weak,  
to encourage the fearful,  
to welcome to estranged.

In the name of he,  
who is the way, the truth and the life

**Amen**

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Season: Lent

Themes: