

TANGAZA COLLEGE

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA.

**A STORY OF THE WAITING
FATHER FOR
HIS SONS' HOME COMING
(LK. 15: 11-32)**

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TUTOR: REV.FR. AELRED LACOMARA,C.P.

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This is a long essay submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, Religious Studies.

FEBRUARY.2001
NAIROBI, KENYA

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material used herein has not been submitted for academic credit to any other Institution/University.

All sources have been cited in full.

Signed.....R.kallumpurath I.C.....

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Date: 7/2/2001

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed.....Aelred Lacomara, C.P......

FR. AELRED LACOMARA C.P.

Date: 7/2/2001

DEDICATION

To my parents who first lit in me the flames of Christian faith and who told me the stories of God's love which makes me take heart and continue my life journey with a smile when things fall apart. It is my joy to dedicate this work to Rev. Fr. John Doman, the Regional Superior of India, whom I admire so much and who is an inspiration and model to me.

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INTRODUCTION

Parables are unique to Jesus' teaching. They are prophetic and demanding. They call us to conversion and reveal that our lives belong to God. Jesus tells us parables in order to break through our deafness and our hardness of heart. And then he gives us himself, the clearest parable of the Father.

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk.15:11-32) is an artistic creation of Jesus. In it, we see how Jesus reacted to some of the most disturbing issues of his day. In this parable God by the lips of Jesus declares his forgiveness and mercy for penitent sinners and tax collectors while at the same time very gently rebuking the self-righteous Pharisees and Scribes for criticising his association and table fellowship with those outcasts and publicans. This is the story of two lost sons. If the younger brother was lost in the distant country, the elder was no less lost behind the barricade of self-righteousness. The chief character in the story is neither of the two sons but the father. Right up to the very last scene, that final meeting with the elder brother, the father bridges over the whole story. The father waits because he loves.

This Essay consists of four chapters. The first chapter speaks about the parables of Jesus as a whole. In it, we look into the meaning of parable, the reason for Jesus' teaching in parables, and the main message of the parables. The second chapter treats specifically of the parable of the Prodigal son. There we will probe into the Lucan creation of the parable, examine the Lucan context. Coming to the third chapter, we will mainly look into the events that take place in the parable, namely, the home-leaving and homecoming of the younger and elder sons, (for the elder brother we can only speak of his possible return). In the fourth chapter we see how the father waits in love for his sons' homecoming and when the younger son returns

the father calls for a celebration. Thus we conclude that the father in the story is a representation of God. Then, we will reflect on homecoming in Christian life. Finally, we wind up the Essay with a general conclusion.

CHAPTER ONE

PARABLES AS A TYPICAL STYLE OF JESUS' TEACHING

Jesus was a walking parable. He was born in a traditional atmosphere of parables, i.e., in a culture where especially the Jewish Rabbis commonly used parables as a method of teaching and getting messages across. Thus he grew up by hearing parables, he lived in parables and he moved with parables. However, Jesus' parables were quite unique and typical to Him. He went through the streets of Jerusalem and the shore of Galilee telling the people parables which healed their inner wounds, made them repent of their sins, brought them closer to God and gave them new heart.

Jesus, the Son of God, who is the fulfilment of all promises and the culmination of God's revelation, came on this earth in order to proclaim God's plan of salvation for all. This is exactly what Jesus discloses through his parables, especially in the parable of the Prodigal Son. This maiden chapter unfolds briefly: the meaning of the parable, the reason why Jesus taught in parables and the news that these parables bring to us.

1.1. THE MEANING OF PARABLE

A precise definition of the parable is not that easy because of its etymological background. This background springs from two different cultures: Greek and Hebrew. The Hebrew word for parable is "marshal" and the Greek word is "parabole". Neither the Greeks nor Hebrews had defined these two words. The

English term, "parable" is derived from the Greek, which is the LXX translation of the Hebrew *marshal* meaning comparison.¹

The Greek word for parable in the New Testament is a compound word, *parabole*. "Para" is a preposition meaning near, beside, with, in, etc. and "ballo" means to throw. So putting these two words together we come up with something like this: "to throw something with force at someone." The root meaning involves the placing of things side by side for the sake of comparison and it was a technical term for a figure of speech in ancient oratory.² Thus the term could mean proverb, similitude, metaphor, riddle type, symbol, allegory, wisdom saying, illustrative story, etc. Actually, the term has a wide range of application.

Parables, the way Jesus used them, are images taken from nature or ordinary life to impart a religious lesson. They come from everyday life. The images in the parables are familiar and expedite better understanding. Addressing mixed and multiple audiences, Jesus creatively fashioned his parables. He must have held his audience spellbound whenever he narrated his moving and stimulating stories.

C.H. Dodd defines a parable this way: "Parable is a metaphor drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."³ So, there is no passivity and no standing like a rock in the hearing of parables. Every hearer is invited and expected to participate actively. It is meant to make an impact and to effect a change in the addressee. Therefore, it is high time for us to allow the parables to speak to us. We are invited to search until we ourselves

¹ William Scott, "Parable" In: Grant Frederick C., and Rowley H.H., eds., Dictionary of the Bible, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963, p. 724

² Daniel R. Seagren, The Parables, Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc , 1986, p.19

³ C.H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom, New York: Charles Scribner's School, 1961, p. 5

discover the meaning of things. We do not interpret the parables as such, rather we see their influence on our way of living. They continually occur and re-occur; they unfold and influence us in every moment of our lives.

The purpose of a parable is to bring about change in the hearts of the hearers. If it does not bring about the conversion of the listener, then it is not worth telling. The work of the parable therefore is to challenge the listener. The parable is meant to persuade, convince, and to convert the hearers.

1.2. THE REASON FOR JESUS' TEACHING IN PARABLES

Here we must begin by asking, why was it that Jesus used parables? He spoke in parables because the characteristic of the Jewish mind was intensely practical. The essence of Jewish mind was expressed in dealing with concrete realities. The question in the Jewish mind was, 'what must I do?' Besides that, the parabolic method appeals to an ordinary man with an ordinary mind. Jesus knew what was in man; and He gave us these cameo-like pictures we call parables so that the great ideas He wished to teach might become comprehensible.⁴

Another reason of Jesus' using of parables was in order to teach people about the next world through the things of this world. In other words, Jesus used earthly things to lead people's minds to higher things. He believed that there is no mere analogy but an inward affinity between the natural and the spiritual order. Paul said the same thing when he said that the visible world is designed to make known the invisible things of God (Rm. 1:20). If you want to know what God is like, look at the world. If you want to know what the fatherhood of God is, look at human fatherhood

⁴ William Barclay. *And Jesus Said*, Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975, p. 12.

at its finest and highest.⁵ His very use of parables shows that it was his conviction that the things of this world can lead a man's thoughts direct to God.

Still another important reason for Jesus to use parables was to persuade people to pass a judgement on things with which they were familiar and then to transfer that judgement to something of significance to which they had been blind. For instance in the Old Testament we see the story of Nathan and David. Here you are told a story, whose meaning you see with crystal clarity and pass a judgement and finally take that judgement and apply it yourself. Jesus told a story the meaning of which the hearers could see, and they pass some sort of judgement.⁶ Then Jesus demanded that they apply that judgement to the hidden aspects of life, which either through deliberate blindness or through dullness of spirit they had never seen.

Again, Jesus saw parables as an effective means of breaking down the teaching of the kingdom of God. Images are like actions, they speak louder than words. "An image or comparison is much richer, has much more communicative and evocative force than mere theoretical argument. It is much more profound and conveys much more meaning."⁷

Jesus used parables with two main objectives: first, to make life vivid and meaningful, and to make the reign of God transparent and imaginable. Nowhere is Jesus' teaching so clear and better understood than in the parables. He told parables to challenge people about the character of God's kingdom, and to invite them to participate in it, and to live by its standard. It is wrong to see Jesus' parables as a means of blocking people from understanding, as many try to interpret Mk 4: 12.

⁵ Ibid. p 13.

⁶ Ibid. p. 14.

⁷ Carlos Mesters, Rediscovering the Bible, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, p 187

Perhaps a parable may sometimes conceal its meaning, but it does so in order to reveal. And while some people would respond with hardness of heart and lack of hearing, Jesus' teaching in parables was to elicit hearing and obedient response.⁸

1.3. THE MESSAGE OF THE PARABLES

In fact, the parables of Jesus provide us with a variety of messages. Now let us have a look at the few prominent ones such as the kingdom of God, God's mercy for sinners, Disciples and the End Time.

1.3.1. The Kingdom of God

Jesus came on earth to establish the kingdom of God. It was present in him and his work and it was to develop until the end of time. It is livened by the power of God and therefore no power on earth can hinder its development. In many of his parables Jesus taught people about his kingdom. The parable of the Mustard seed (Mk. 4:30f) must be seen in a setting of the Galilean ministry. We could observe the ministry as a time of promise but at the same time the bitter opposition of the ruling classes was evident. The tiny group of insignificant disciples as well didn't show themselves to be a cradle of hope for the future. As from a tiny seed a tree springs, so from the little band of Jesus' disciples a kingdom will grow embracing the whole world, all of humanity. Therefore, that kingdom will be like a leaven in a mass of dough (Lk. 13:20f), which would be a vital ferment transforming the world. The parable of the Seed Growing Secretly portrays the growth of the kingdom as the work of God (Mk. 4:26-29). The seed has within it its own principle of growth, an intimate force that will bring it fulfilment.⁹

⁸ K. R. Snodgrass, "Parable", In: J B. Green, Scott Mcknight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds., Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels. Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1992, p. 594.

⁹ Wilfrid J. Harrington. A Key to the Parables, New York: Paulist Press, 1964, p. 71-72

The parable of the Sower (Mk. 4: 3-8) depicts the abundant harvest of the kingdom beyond expectations. The kingdom of God grows and develops despite every hindrance. The story of the Unjust Judge (Lk. 18: 28) teaches that God will vindicate those who cry to him persistently. The emphasis is not on the entreaties of the widow but on the action of the judge.¹⁰ The Friend at Midnight (Lk.11: 5-8) stresses that the children of the kingdom have the assurance that God listens to them and will hasten to help them.

1.3.2. God's Mercy for Sinners

There is another group of parables that contain the Good News itself. They tell that salvation is sent to the poor and that Jesus has come as a Saviour for sinners. Some of these parables are addressed not to the poor but to the opponents. Their main object is defence and vindication of the gospel and God's care for sinners. Jesus declaration of salvation to the poor and to the sinners both defends and justifies his gospel and testifies to a loving God. In the whole series of parables He turned the eyes of his critics on the poor to whom he preached the good news. At one time he made this clear in answer to a specific charge that He came to call the sinners (Mk. 3: 16f). Simon is told that the woman whom he despised is nearer to God than he. Jesus tells the critics that they are like the guests who refused the invitation for the feast and looked contemptuously on those who had taken their places.(Lk. 14: 16-24; Matt. 22: 1-10). They are like the vinedressers who insulted their lord and maltreated his servants and who have chosen for themselves the best place in the kingdom.¹¹ And Jesus warns them that they will be lucky if they are offered the lowest place (Lk. 14: 7-11).

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 75

In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15: 11-32), Jesus says that God eagerly desires the repentance of sinners and pines to win them back. And the Pharisees behave like the elder son who grumbled at the father's generosity and love. The lost sheep and lost coin highlight Jesus' concern for sinners and outcasts. The final words in the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) "because I am good" exhibits the core of the parable in addressing the murmurers and the criticisers of the good news.

The self-righteous could not understand the reason for Jesus' association, seeking and winning over of the sinners. He wanted to make them realise the infinite value of the little ones in the eyes of God. God is like that: so good to the poor, joyful when the lost is found, full of fatherly love for the returning child and so gracious to the needy.

1.3.3. Disciples

Jesus solicitously sought the unfortunates in order to transform them into disciples. The parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price (Matt. 13:44-46), emphasise the need to give up everything for the sake of the Kingdom. The cost of the surrender is highly significant. Through the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10: 30-37), Jesus teaches that the quality of a faithful disciple is a boundless love. He continues to respond to the Lawyer that charity goes out without reserve to one in need for a Christian's neighbour is everyone.¹² A true disciple like the sinful woman (Lk.7: 47) should feel compelled to pardon the trifling offences of others.

¹¹ Joachim Jeremias, The Parable of Jesus, Great Britain: SCM Press, 1985, p 131

¹² Harrington, op Cit., p. 138

1.3.4. The End

Again, another important message of the parables is the End Time in which often the Old Testament imagery such as judgement, harvest, feast and marriage are taken up. The end will appear like a thief in the night, like a master returning unexpectedly from a long journey and like a bridegroom who tarries on the way. (Matt. 24:43-44; 13:34-37; 25:1-13). The tree will be judged by its fruits, a saying which teaches that the true standing of a person will be seen. There are also a couple of parables that talk about the great sifting, namely, the separation of corn and weeds, of good and useless fish, of wise and foolish virgins, of faithful and unfaithful servants.¹³ It speaks as well of the sentence or reward that will follow: the wicked, cut off from the joyful family of God will be thrown into prison, cast into the fire. At last the faithful ones will have a reward far beyond their merits, that is, the joy of the wedding - feast.

To close this opening chapter, it will be important to keep in mind that all the synoptic writers portray Jesus as a renowned Rabbi who taught by using parables and proverbs. Yet, He differed from them for He taught with certain undernotes of authority (Lk. 6:20-49). The Gospels present the *ipsissima vox* (the very voice) of Jesus, and this voice is clearly heard mostly in the parables. This is because, "Jesus spoke in parables, he thought in parables, acted in parables," and "we stand before Jesus when reading His parables." Even though parables had both Greek and Semitic traditions, it was Jesus who for the first time in history used parables so consistently, creatively and effectively. And it is important to note that parables are not a separate teaching or a different literary work, but they are part and parcel of the Good News.

¹³ Ibid. p.66.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON AS GOD'S ATTITUDE OF MERCY FOR THE SINNERS

The story of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15: 11-32) is one of Jesus' deathless parables and it is essentially the story of the Father's love and mercy for sinners. It is so interesting to observe that all the Gospel-writers present Jesus' message in a slightly different style and with different emphasis. Each Evangelist tries to picture Jesus through the perspective of gospel faith in him and through his own particular experience of Jesus. Here, we are concerned with the Lucan perspective of the parables. Luke demonstrates how God's plan of salvation was realised in Jesus. Further more, he emphasises the universalism of the plan of salvation, even though, only the sinners responded to it. In this chapter, we will treat Luke's fabrication of the story of the Prodigal Son; then, proceed to view the context of this parable and finally a brief explanation of the parable.

2.1. THE LUCAN CREATION OF THE PARABLE

Luke appears to be a highly gifted storyteller. He stands unique and ever remembered through the artistry in his stories. His narrative skill and literary unity of the chapter 15 is so remarkable in which the Scribes and Pharisees are exposed as the resentful elder son, while the tax collectors and sinners could be seen as the lost Sheep, the lost Coin and the lost Son. Yet this group of people appears to be the heroes of the story. A very significant aspect to be noted in this chapter is the way that God assumes the images of a male Shepherd, female Householder, and the compassionate Father. He is found anxious and restless until His dear ones return. Therefore, when we discuss the Lucan version of the parable of the prodigal son, we

should not consider this parable in isolation from the rest the chapter, because Luke has indeed linked this parable with the rest of chapter 15.

Perhaps, Luke rewrote the parable of the prodigal son in his own style and reworked it thematically. However, the parable emerges from the Lucan *Sondergut* (his proper and special material). A couple of scholars claimed very recently that the story of the Prodigal Son originally consisted only of the first part (15:11-24) or the whole narrative is Luke's own creation. At the same time it is worthwhile to note that the fact that only Luke preserves this parable makes the reconstruction of its pre-Lucan form extremely difficult. Pol Vonck mentions the disagreement that goes on among the scholars about the literary unity of this section. He says, "some say, that only verses 11-24, dealing with the younger son, go back to Jesus. They hold that the second part, verses 25-32, dealing with the elder brother is an expansion, most probably, by Luke."¹⁴

It is really a hard task to find out to what extent the story of the Prodigal Son has been altered and rewritten by Luke. Certainly, Luke made at least two redactional changes. First he wrote the introduction (15:1-2) and placed the Prodigal Son after the twin-similitudes, that is, the lost sheep and the lost coin. In doing so he made an effort to constitute chapter 15 as a balanced whole with the theme loss; i.e. the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son.¹⁵

Luke stresses the theme of repentance and conversion as typical of himself. In chapter 15, verses 7 and 10 we read: "I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety- nine righteous

¹⁴ Pol Vonck, *Understanding 42 Gospel Parables*, Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1981, p. 105

¹⁵ Frederick Houk Borsch, *Many Things in the Parables*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995, p.45

people who have no need of repentance" (v. 7). Again in verse 10, we hear: "in just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents." The expression "the righteous people who have no need of repentance" seems to be a Lucan addition. When we look into the first part of the Prodigal Son, immediately after the twin-similitude, we view the conversion process and the initiatives of repentance springing from the younger son.¹⁶ This will take us back and remind us of the previous verses 7 and 10.

More than the aspect of conversion, what is much more remarkable in this chapter is the shared joy where we observe God and angel rejoicing at the return of a sinner. Because of the new context the meaning of the twin similitude has been modified. That is to say that the murmuring of the Pharisees and Scribes (vv. 1-2) and the stubbornness of the elder brother (vv.25-32) give a new and greater relevance to the appeal of the shepherd and the housewife. They invite their neighbours and friends to share their joy, which is identical to that of the father and his elder son. Jesus himself makes an effort to win over the Pharisees and Scribes by inviting them to share in the joy. In fact, Jesus challenges them to break the shell of pride and come out of their nasty attitude of sterile religiosity, and totally commit themselves to God.¹⁷ However, the two important Lucan accentuation which characterises chapter 15, are the active repentance of the sinner and the appeal to those who complain about Jesus' concern for sinners and the outcasts.

In writing chapter 15 in about AD 80, Luke wished to tell his readers about the struggle, which divided Christians in the first decades after Jesus' resurrection. It was caused by the acceptance of non-Jewish converts. The readers were called to

¹⁶ Jan Lambrecht, Once More Astonished, New York Crossroad, 1981, p.50

identify the elder brother with the Christians of Jewish origin who stood for principles

2.2. THE CONTEXT OF THE PARABLE

The context of the parable of the prodigal son has to do with the lost and the found. The context of this parable emerges in the introductory verses of chapter 15: 1-2. Jesus told this parable as a challenge to the Pharisees and Scribes who murmured at Jesus' table-fellowship with sinners and tax collectors. Their charge against Him was that "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."(v. 2b)

The setting of the parable is revealed when the author tells us that "The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him."(v. 1). It simply denotes that the message is for all. All are invited even though only the least expected ones respond. For Luke salvation was for all people both sinners and righteous. Unfortunately, it was only the former who responded positively. The people who gathered around Jesus were the tax collectors and sinners. The tax collectors and sinners were: "(1) People who led an immoral life. (e.g. adulterers, swindlers, Luke 18:11) and (2) people who followed a dishonourable calling (i.e. an occupation which notoriously involved immorality or dishonesty), and who were on that account deprived of civil rights, such as holding office, or bearing witness in legal proceedings."¹⁸ The tax collectors and sinners drew close to Jesus in order to listen to Him. They discovered that it was only His words that gave them hope and so they wished to drink and savour His gracious and healing Words.

Jesus understands them, empathises and identifies with them but he neither discriminates nor condemns them. In fact these despised people highlight the contrast

¹⁷ Ibid p 50

between the attitude of Jesus and that of the Pharisees.¹⁹ They are naturally drawn close to the Nazarene who loved them. Jesus easily attracted the outcasts because he opened the way of salvation to them, and remission for all sins. Jesus association and especially dining with sinners irritated and scandalised the Pharisees and Scribes. This gave rise to a sort of tension between them and Jesus. For them to dine with the irreligious, notoriously bad characters, and the despised, was to undermine the conservative regulations of the Pharisees.²⁰

The context is also indicated in verse 2 where we find that " the Pharisees and Scribes began to complain." The Pharisees constituted the most important sect in the Jewish Religion. They were a group of people who were devoted to upholding the purity of Jewish faith and life. The Scribes were the accredited experts of the law. Law for them was the sum of wisdom and only true learning and obedience to it was the only sure way to God.²¹

The Pharisees and Scribes appear to be ever grumblers and murmurers. In fact, in the Scriptures to "grumble" or to "murmur" is to complain bitterly, showing dissatisfaction or even rebellious disapproval. When we take a glance into the book of Exodus, we find that the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the Wilderness (cf. Ex.15, 16, Num.14, etc.). We have several instances of such situations in Luke's Gospel where the Pharisees and Scribes display this rebellious attitude towards Jesus. We view them grumbling against Jesus' disciples in 5:30 and observing Jesus suspiciously in 6:7. We see them forming a deep grudge against

¹⁸ Jeremias, op cit , p.132

¹⁹ Charles L. Childers, "The Gospel According to Luke". In: Ralph Earle, A Elwood Sanner and Charles L. Childers, eds., Beacon Bible Commentary, Missouri Beacon Hill Press, 1964, p. 556

²⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961, p. 793

²¹ Harrington, op cit , p. 130

Jesus in 11:53. They might well be the group in 19:7, though not clearly stated. Jesus addresses them in 2: 34; a member of this group complains in 7: 39. The Pharisees objected to his disciples picking ears of corn on the Sabbath.²²

The parable of the prodigal son is Jesus' defence of Good News for the poor more than an actual proclamation of it. Jesus demonstrates that the Pharisees and Scribes were wrong. He speaks of a parallel situation. The younger son, who lives a life contrary to God's commands and serves the Gentiles, resembles the tax collectors and sinners in the story. While the elder son, who never violated a single command of the father, is identified with the Pharisees and Scribes who kept to the letter of the Law. Jesus does not condemn them but pities them and invites them to share the joy.

In order to wind up this chapter, it is becoming to remember that the parable of the Prodigal Son is a parable in the strict sense. It is an imaginary narrative, which captivates the hearer by its delicacy of feeling, its psychological descriptions and graphic depiction. By all means, it requires a transposition from metaphor to reality, from the fictive to the factual. However, the application is not explicitly made by the narrator, on the contrary, he seems his hearers to do their own further reflection so that they will understand deeper meaning. With his parable he also confronts the hearers with an invitation, a challenge.

Jesus presents the parable of the prodigal son in order to proclaim that guilt can be removed and sickness can be healed. Jesus tries to underline God's mercy with this parable and his coming for the salvation of sinners. Jesus wishes to emphasise how God deals with sinners. The sinner is loved before he can repent and when he does repent, God restores him to his own family. The prodigal son is also an

²² Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Gospel of Luke", In: *Sacra Pagina* Vol. 3, Minnesota: The Liturgical

apologetic parable by means of which Jesus justifies his own conduct. He legitimates his own activity by showing that the father (God) restores the sinner as his son. The parable also aims for the conversion and the winning over of the opponents of Jesus. He invites his adversaries to change their view of God and Jesus Himself.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EVENTS OF HOME-LEAVING AND HOMECOMING

Leaving always coexists with coming because we part in order to meet. A home-leaving implies a homecoming. This is the experience of the younger son in the story of prodigal. He leaves home with a deliberate decision never to return home. But he ends up journeying back home as his designs and dreams are shattered to pieces. The elder son as well flees from home by being reluctant to step in at the return of his younger brother. But the father prepares a way for him by inviting him to celebrate with him. Having examined the Lucan creation and context of the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the last chapter, now we will look at the events in this story. In this chapter we have a glimpse of the impact of the division of property in a Jewish family while the father is still young and healthy; the younger son's leaving home and his return home; and the Elder son's home-leaving and his possible homecoming.

3.1. THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE PROPERTY IN THE JEWISH FAMILY

A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. (Luke 15: 11-12)

The inheritance of wealth has a very significant meaning in all eastern culture. The inheritance of property is regarded as a gift from the father and care for his children. It is seen as an extension of the father and the whole family tradition. The inheritance is valued and treasured as the final blessing from the father. For the blessing to be complete and fruitful the children are not supposed to misuse or squander the property but use it properly. Usually, the father of an eastern family

distributes his property to his children when he is quite convinced that his life is drawing near to the point of death. Normally, no son makes a request to his father for the inheritance and no father divides it before his extreme last days. The actual day of the distribution of the property is a great occasion for an eastern family because all the members of that family gather together from all corners for a family celebration.

In the story of the prodigal son we perceive the son making a surprising request for his inheritance to the father: "Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me." In the Jewish cultural background, the son's request for the share of property simply implies a wish that his father die. The Greek text word for what the father gives his son is *bios*. It has different meanings in English such as "means of subsistence", "property" and "manner of life conduct." Literally it means "life". So, what the father divided between them was his life because the division of property denoted his death.²³ Kenneth Bailey reports about the conversation he had with easterners regarding the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is living. The conversation almost always went like this:

"Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?"

"Never!"

"Could anyone ever make a request?"

"Impossible!"

"If anyone ever did, what would happen?"

"His father would beat him, of course!"

"Why?"

²³ Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 111

"The request means-he wants his father to die!"²⁴

In short, in the eastern culture, a son requesting the right of disposition of the property assumes his father's death. A son had the right of disposal of the property only after the father's death. In the light of the implications of the request, it is all the more remarkable that the father agrees to the son's request. In the Middle East the father would be expected to explode and discipline such a boy. It is difficult to imagine a more dramatic illustration of the quality of love, which grants freedom even to reject the one who loves!

The book of Sirach admonishes very strongly that the father of a Jewish family is not to distribute his property during his lifetime to anybody (*Sirach 33: 20-23*). The father who does the early partition and disposition of the wealth and gives the right of disposition to his son is considered to be foolish because he will end up losing his livelihood.

The legal position with regards to the distribution of property was like this. There were two ways in which property might pass from father to son. Firstly, it was passed by will. This shows the surrendering of the father himself. This is because by surrendering his property, the father loses his honour and position. In the family, a father's honour depends on his being embedded, being himself the family's support and representative. The division of the property endangers his honour and family.²⁵ In this story, the distribution of the property is going completely against the Jewish culture because the father is still fit and healthy.

²⁴ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, Michigan. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983, pp. 161-162

²⁵ Scott, op. cit., p. 110

Secondly, the inheritance might be transferred as a gift during the life of the father. But the property became available to the son upon the death of his father. This means in case of gift during the father's lifetime, the son obtains the right of possession, then, the father cannot sell it anymore. The son also does not acquire the right of disposal. If the son sold the property, the buyer can take possession only upon the death of the father. The son does not have the right of use over it until his father's death.²⁶ But, strange enough in the parable of the prodigal this does not seem to be the case, because the son squanders all his inheritance.

3.2. THE YOUNGER SON'S HOME-LEAVING

After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. (Luke 15: 13-16)

The Jewish culture treasured the concept of the formation of the children in the family. The family had the right to control and to transmit the wisdom of the elders to their children and to try to make sure that nobody went astray. To isolate oneself from the family was to miss the teaching that one was supposed to get and so this was the reason why no person was allowed to abandon one's own family. The family was essentially seen as the life-giving source to its members.

In the story of the prodigal, the younger son wanted to be independent of the authority from home and to live a carefree life. In a typical Jewish family, the

²⁶ Jeremias, op. cit . p 128

children were supposed to stay next to their parents, and running away from home would leave a kind of stigma on the family. In their wisdom saying, it is stated: "a friend who is nearby is better than a brother who is far away." (Prov. 27:10c) So the rebelling attitude of a son in the family, by running away from home, was seen as a disgrace to the family.²⁷

In this story, the younger son was dying to get out of his home. The younger son thought of his home-leaving as a necessary evil because he wanted to become an adult. He wanted to develop his life on his own. He needed to be independent of the father. He was fed up living as a child of the father. Therefore, he approached his father with a demand, "Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me." (v.12). With such a hurtful demand the son treated his father as though dead. The son thought that his father would come alive and reveal himself as father and assume his authority as a father by turning down his demand. On the contrary, the father graciously showed his willingness to comply with his son's demand. But, there was an interesting psychological aspect that lay hidden in the father's decision to divide the property. In the son's demand, lied hidden the wish for his father's death but when the father agreed on the division, there lied the wish that the son remain always his child.²⁸ The father knew that his son's life away from the father would only lead him into a childish, careless, self-centred life, and a life against the commands of God. Only in staying with the father, in union with the father, would he grow into an independent, mature adult

²⁷ John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in the Parable*, U.S.A: Fortress Press, 1988, p 154

²⁸ Richard Q. Ford, *The Parables of Jesus: Recovering the Art of Listening*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, p.

The son left home with a desire to live in a distant country. He "set off to a distant country" (v.13). The question to be asked is 'how do we measure the distance to a 'distant country'? At times, we are inclined to measure it in terms of miles and at other time in terms of morals. The distant country was the younger son's distance from the father's house both in terms of miles and morals. The "distant country" indicated a complete contradictory way of living, thinking and acting from that which had been handed down to him from generation to generation as a sacred legacy. Living in the distant country would mean a denial and betrayal of the treasured values of the family and the Jewish community.²⁹ It was a place where all that had been considered holy at home was disregarded.

He left home with an aspiration to move forward with his own designs and plans, to live a separate life from his father. But in going to a distant country, he found himself returning to infantile dependencies and gratification. He gained his freedom only to abuse it. Now he wanted his father to show the real way forward to adulthood and maturity. He got stranded and he could not move forward because the father he sought was behind him.

Another reason why he left home was to become "himself." But in the distant country he ended up becoming like the father. The son unconsciously imitated his father. When he squandered his inheritance recklessly and without thinking, he was doing exactly what his father did. As the father tried to keep his son by giving away his resources, so the son did the same; by becoming like his father, he attempted to keep the only father he had.³⁰

²⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Great Britain: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1998, p. 36

³⁰ Ford, op. cit., p 101

There was a couple of shock that the young son had to face as the result of his home leaving. Firstly, the son wasted his means of caring for his father in his old age and in case of necessity. A son's actions were supposed to be a source of joy to his parents especially to the father. The relationship between a son and the father was very special. By all means it was the duty of a son to make sure that his father is well taken care of. This assistance was particularly necessary when the father was drawing closer to his last days. But in the case of the prodigal son we see a contradictory behaviour. He collected all that belonged to him and abandoned the family by fleeing to a far off country. He put an end to all the relations between the family and himself.

Secondly, his home-leaving was found in his association with a Gentile, making a living in what for a Jew was sinful, i.e., feeding pigs. Swine were unclean animals according to the Jewish law. Jews were forbidden to eat them or have any contact with them. In the foreign country the young son had only a short-lived glory. Soon, he ended up in bankruptcy. He was doomed to be a destitute as a result of his wastefulness.³¹ He was broke. Just when he had everything, a severe famine arose precisely in that land to which he had gone to enjoy himself. Alas, unfortunately, the only job he got was contrary to both his social position and his religion. The job he gained was looking after the swine. It was unthinkable for a faithful Jew to deal with 'unclean animals.' The Rabbis always said: "Cursed be the man who breeds swine."³² A true Jew would rather prefer to be dead than get mixed up with swine. (Macc. 6:8). In allowing the son to leave home prematurely, the father expected an inevitable and eventual homecoming of his son.

³¹ Kevin O' Sullivan, Living Parables, Milwaukee. The Bruce Publishing Company, 1963, p.66

3.3. THE YOUNGER SON'S HOMECOMING

Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father' hired workers have more than enough food to eat but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers." So he got up and went back to his father. (Luke 15: 17-20)

In the story, the younger son left his home with a huge amount of money as well as with much pride. He dreamt of living his own life far away from his father and his community. In the end he returns with shattered hopes and empty hands. He had squandered his wealth, health, honour and his reputation. This man had gone deep into a foreign land and lost everything and so experienced emptiness, humiliation and defeat. He was so much like his father and now he looked worse than his father's servants. He had become like a slave.

The younger son came to the awareness of how lost he was when no one around him showed any interest in him. They were interested in him only as long as he could be used for their purposes. There is a popular saying in India that when you laugh, many will join you but when you come to cry only your shadow will join you. In other words, in your prosperity and happiness, you will have many friends to share with, but once you become destitute you will to suffer alone. In this parable, we find this to be condition of the young man. When he had no money left to spend and no gifts left to give, he stopped existing for his friends.

³² A. Lacomara, Lecture Notes on Parables, Tangaza College, 1999

Again, his coming home takes place when he realised that nobody recognised him anymore. Normally, no one comes forward to show any sign of recognition to a foreigner. Real loneliness comes when we have lost all sense of having things in common. He realised that he was not even considered a fellow human being, when they refused to give him the food of the pigs. He was shocked to know that death would be the next natural step that would follow him.³³ When he saw the seriousness of his own self-destruction, he opted for life.

He cherished the memory of his father and treasured the good old days at home with his father. In the depth of his heart he knew that he was the child of his father. That was the reason he was able to leave the foreign country and return home with the decisive words in his heart "father, ... I no longer deserve to be called your son." On the one hand, he realised that he had lost the dignity of his sonship, but still, it conscientised him in the awareness that he was indeed the son who had dignity to lose.³⁴

His homecoming signalled reclaiming of his sonship. Actually, it was the loss of everything that made him realise his identity. Perhaps, he had to lose everything in order to come into touch with the ground of his being. When he was treated as one of the pigs, he realised that he was not a pig but a human being, a son of his father. This realisation became the basis for his choice to live instead of to die. This awareness of and confidence in his father's love gave him the strength to claim for himself his sonship; it wasn't based on any merit. We find the young son journeying home with confusion. Anyhow, he admitted that he would get better treatment as a slave in his father's home rather than live as a stranger in a foreign land. Yet, he was not able to

³³ Henri, *op. cit.*, p.48

trust his father's love. Even though he knew that he was still the son, he believed that he had lost the dignity to be called "son". So, he prepared himself to accept the status of a "hired worker." We discover that the young man's repentance is not in the light of the immense love of a forgiving father but a self-serving repentance that offers the possibility of survival. On his homecoming, he told his father to treat him as a hired worker. Through this he enabled him to be his father again into a father because then the father could make demand upon him.³⁵

The younger son came home when he assumed his position as a dependent child where the father provided and the son received. The son had reached a point of destroying all the resources except his father. Becoming dependent on the father again enabled him to appreciate the foolishness of his desires and dreams of spending life in an alien land. This allowed him to be liberated from his own self-centredness, and going astray from the father. At this point the son confessed his leaving to the father and accepted the responsibility for squandering the patrimony. He also admitted his failure to fulfil his filial obligation to support his father.

Some commentators would say that it was the son's need to be merely fed that led to his homecoming. More optimistically what brought him home was the experience of his father as the provider of sustenance. The son could not think otherwise because when he thought of food, he thought of his father who always provided him sustenance.³⁶

Another aspect that brought the son back home was his recognition of his father not as an owner of wealth but as an owner of love. When the son saw the

³⁴ Ford, *op cit.*, p

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 104

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 103

father as an owner of property, he approached him for his inheritance. But when he recognised him as the owner of love, he returned to him and requested to be treated as a hired worker. The hired worker would only work for him and love him without expecting any kind of inheritance of the property. But if the son would see him as the father then he would again look for his inheritance and see him only as an owner of property.

Jeremias says "Coming to his senses", is an expression of repentance in the younger son.³⁷ He realises that it was his own sinful folly that brought him to such a pathetic situation. He returns to himself, i.e., he comes to his senses and examines his positions. The true homecoming i.e. the climax of that repentance and conversion took place in the son only after the encounter with the father. It happened with the experience of the father's forgiveness and mercy and receiving the warmth of his love.

3.4. THE ELDER SON'S HOME-LEAVING

Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, 'Look. All these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' (v. 25-30)

³⁷ Jeremias, op. cit., p 130

For the elder son it had been a hard day in the field. He was tired after the toil and moil of that day. So, he came home looking forward to his supper and for a good rest. As he was drawing near to his home, he was astonished to hear music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked him the reason. The servant replied: "Your brother has returned." (v. 27). At that very moment he became lost in his hatred towards his young brother. Perhaps he was thinking of his father's thoughtlessness of giving out a portion of the family wealth. What hurt the elder most was the welcome bestowed on the prodigal and for making all kinds of fuss about this man's coming home.

No society could ever arrest the elder son and condemn him because he did not commit a public crime. His sins grew out of his internal disposition of the mind and attitude and they were worse than that of the prodigal.

He was lost in self-righteousness. He said to his father: "Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders;" (v. 29a). The elder son's whole religious outlook was one of self-sufficiency and moral rectitude. His religion was a religion of 'doing' things but not 'being'. The elder brother was full of self-righteousness. He appreciated his acts and congratulated himself and obviously considered himself better than his brother.³⁸ This disposition of mind kept the elder son out of his father's house.

Here, the elder son could be perceived as a "hired worker." More than the prodigal, it was the elder brother who was in danger of becoming a hired servant. Through his constant insistence on service and obedience (v.29a), he displayed the mentality of a servant. His complaints exposed that obedience had become a burden

³⁸ John Philip, People of the Bible, New York Testament Books, 1999, p.149

and service turned out to be a slavery. He behaved as if he was not convinced of being a son.

The elder son was lost in his secret regrets. He said to his father: " you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends." (v.29b). The elder son was not very different from the younger one because in his innermost heart, he also had a "distant country" in every moment of his life. He dreamt of doing exactly the same thing as his brother in the depth of his soul. He wished to snatch his father's resources and squander it in sinful self-indulgence.³⁹ The younger brother was honest enough to bring everything out into the open while the elder nourished and cherished his lust secretly in his soul and regretted not having had an opportunity to share in this world's fun.

"He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house," (v.28). What made the elder son really angry was not only the father's response to his brother's failure but his perceived bias. The elder son exploded at his father: "your son." But the father quietly replied to him: "your brother was dead and has come to life again;" The elder son had stayed at home close to his father and always worked together with the father. But, his reaction of resentment revealed that he had been thousands of miles away from home in spirit.⁴⁰

His reaction of self-righteousness, secret regret and resentments depict that even though he appeared to be moral and religious in reality that he had nothing in common with his father. Because of his inner disposition, he failed to grasp and experience his father's love and grace.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 150

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.152

He blamed the father of favouritism with the following words: "Yet you never gave me even a young goat." (v.24). This expression reveals (especially "me") the elder son's self-centeredness and egoism. He was very angry to see his brother getting a calf while he himself did not get even a young goat. It was a false humility. The difficulty with this is that the mood of false humility does not fit the emotion of anger. He accused his father of loving his worthless brother more than him and giving the younger brother a calf while he had not received even a young goat. He failed to acknowledge all the merited favour his father had extended to him. His accusation was extremely unfair. In fact, he was also invited to share in the celebration.⁴¹

By refusing the invitation of the father to be a part of the celebration the elder son leaves home. He simply ignores his father's call to join him in his joy. He not only disobeyed his father perhaps for the first time in life, but also he humiliated his father in front of all his friends, relatives and neighbours. He is not quite different from his younger brother, he stays at home watching over what is left of his inheritance. It was his responsibility, as the elder brother, not to let his young brother leave home. At least he could have taken an interest to see if his little brother was returning home. But he ended up leaving home at the return of his young brother.

3.5. THE ELDER SON'S HOMECOMING

He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' (v.31)

⁴¹ Bailey, op. cit., p.198

The most beautiful part in the story of the prodigal is the father's love for his self-centred, and resentful elder son as much as his love for the younger one. Perhaps it causes a heartache in anyone who observes the father standing out there in the field and pleading and urging him to respond to his love and affection. Will he respond to his father's plea or remain stuck in his bitterness? Is there a possibility of liberation for the elder from his captivity? However, we do not know, how the story ends. All we know is that at the last scene, the elder brother stood outside. In this story, we are not told anything regarding the homecoming of the elder son. We can only speak of the possible conversion and the return of the elder son. It is left an open question so that we are required to write the ending ourselves. Each Christian is invited to compose a conclusion of his own.

In the context of the lost and found, I would consider the homecoming of the elder son an inevitable reality. He cannot stay long without responding to the true and all welcoming love of his father. If he refuses to go in, he will suffer both the starvation of his father's love and the ready banquet. Eventually he must come inside to be touched and healed by his father's love and his tears of joy. Like his young brother, the elder cannot live away from his father. He is the child of his father and will die a life apart from the father. The younger son let himself be embraced by the forgiving love of his father while the elder son stood afar and glared angrily at the gesture of forgiveness and love.

To experience homecoming, the elder son needed to realise that his father loved both sons with the same love, even though he expressed it according to each one's individual journey. He knew both intimately and understood their gifts and shortcomings. The father responded to both according to their uniqueness. The

homecoming of his younger son made the father call for a joyful celebration and the father extended an invitation to the elder son to full participation in that joy.⁴²

For the elder son his father and young brother became as foreigners. He believed that he no longer had a brother and no longer a father. His brother was a public sinner and his father a slave owner. Thus the elder son became an alien in his own house. The relationship was broken and communion became impossible. Everything became self-conscious and calculated. His return to the home can only take place once he acknowledged and experienced the unlimited love and affection of his father.

There was no longer any trust. The elder son needed to trust his father for homecoming to be possible. The son approached the house suspiciously. A son with a good relationship with his father would have come right in. His doubt kept him away from home, because he felt less loved than his young brother.⁴³

The son always worked to gain the father's approval because he failed to recognise that the father always stayed on his side. He had made himself a slave for something that was already his. When the father tells the elder son "you are here with me always; everything I have is yours"(v.32), the father speaks as a companion (you are with me always) and co-owner of the farm (everything I have is yours). The father addressed him as a "child" not son. The word "teknon", (child), in Greek denotes affection which also emphasises that he is the true heir.⁴⁴ The elder son needed to become aware that the unconditional love of the father melted away all

⁴² Henri, *op cit.*, pp 80-81

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 85

⁴⁴ Scott, *op cit.*, p 121

resentments and anger and made him free to love beyond the need to please or find approval or affirmation.

The parable of the prodigal son stops on a psychological and spiritual dilemma rather than with a conclusion. The elder son's decision is going to be crucial for his future. He can either die in his self-image or come to live in renewing the relationship with his father by forgoing his egoism. The parable stops at this decisive juncture on the road of life's journey where the elder son stands with a potential for tragedy or life. It was up to the elder son to accept the freedom given by the father. The father was fully aware of his son's need for his love and a "home." It was up to the son to complete the story. The incomplete parable suggests that the father's love is not dependent upon an appropriate completion of the story.

To sum up this chapter, it is good to reflect what would have happened if the father had not presented himself as a visible demonstration of waiting and unexpected love for his younger son. As a consequence the father would only have bred one more hired servant and not a son. We need to remember that the father already had a servant-type son (the elder son) in the house. The father let the younger son experience a distant country in his life journey so that the son would "come to his senses." He would come to know himself, his relationship with his father and God Himself. To win his younger son the father had to allow his estrangement in order to attain a real recognition of the father's love as always deep and abiding.

If the younger son is an overt sinner, then the elder was a covert sinner. Both committed grave sins. They differ only in their response to the father's unexpected love. While the younger son represented the sinners and tax collectors, the elder represented the Pharisees and Scribes who were murmurers. The elder needed

repentance not only from his rebellious complaints but also from his exclusive, merciless and resentful attitude. He should gaze at the welcoming arms, listen to the tender words; appreciate the gentle attitude of the father beckoning him to come home and celebrate.

Every one is in need of repentance and conversion. Every body needs salvation and that is what Jesus has come to do. Jesus is standing right there offering salvation to all, and encouraging all to honour the invitation. The choice is all ours, an option is left wide open for each person, to either join the celebration or stand out in opposition.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FATHER WAITS IN LOVE FOR HIS SONS' HOMECOMING

We wait for birth. We wait for love to touch us and wait for life to grow. Waiting is the measure of love. To wait for another person is to be willing to be alone for him. To wait for someone is to say that the present does not begin until he or she arrives. In the story of the prodigal we find a father who is waiting with a heart full of love and a soul full of affection for his sons' homecoming. In this chapter we will have a look at the waiting prodigal father and his invitation for a celebration at the return of his younger son. Then we will proceed to examine the attitude of the Heavenly Father and finally, our own Homecoming as the goal of Christian Life.

4.1. THE WAITING FATHER

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, {his younger son} and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him... his father came out and pleaded with him {his elder son}. (Lk. 15: 20 and 28b)

In the story of the prodigal, everyday the father went out looking for his lost younger son and waiting for his return. He wanted to accompany him back home. He wanted to save his son from facing the hostility of the village, the insults, stones and garbage that would be thrown at him. The father humiliated himself daily in front of his family, friends, villagers and even strangers. He seemed to have no life other than bringing his lost son home.⁴⁵

When the father saw him coming from a long way off, "he ran to his son" to meet him. Normally, an oriental nobleman never ran anywhere. It would be

⁴⁵ Megan McKenna, *Parables: The Arrows of God*, New York: Orbis Books, 1994, p.135

considered most undignified and humiliating for an elderly oriental to run. But this father is an exceptional one who would not be hindered by convention.⁴⁶

The father "embraced and kissed him." The father's kiss on the cheek prevents the son from kissing the hand or feet of his father. The kiss is not a sign of equality as some commentators consider because an oriental father is never his son's equal. But the father's kiss is a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. The father makes the reconciliation at the threshold of the village. Thus the son enters the village under the protective care of the father's acceptance. The father did not utter a word of acceptance and welcome but his acts replaced speech. The love expressed is too profound for words. Kissing affectionately pointed to the maternal part of the father. The father did not wait to test the son's sincerity.⁴⁷ The father played a nourishing role not a legal or paternal role.

In the ancient East especially in India, there existed a particular custom with regard to leaving home and returning. When a son left home to a far country for a special purpose and for a very long period, he would carry with him a hallmark from his family. It could be a broken piece of an earthen pot or a piece of a cloth from a traditional family tunic etc. He might have changed his physical features beyond recognition within those years. So when he returned home, it would be difficult for the family to recognise the son. On such a situation the son produced his hallmark to his family which he carried with him when he left home long ago. Thus, he would be accepted and reunited to his family. In this story, the father could not wait for any such sort of sign of recognition but just accepted him back home.

⁴⁶ Wilfrid, J Harrington. Parables Told by Jesus. New York. ALBA House, 1974, p. 128

⁴⁷ Bailey. op cit. p. 136

The initiative came from the father for he saw, felt, ran, embraced and kissed his son. Only the father had recognised his son in the dejected beggar and he was the only one to be moved with love. While the prodigal walked slowly in shame, fear and disgrace, the father, charged by gentle love, ran to welcome him.⁴⁸ What a lovely image! What a warm welcome to a guilty son! Only a father, and it really has to be a kind and loving father could do this. This gesture leaves us no room for doubt that the prodigal was fully pardoned, and absolved from his impetuous mistakes.

The father's love was the same for both sons. The father's heart was not divided into more or less. The father was truly filled with joy at his young son's return. But as soon as he sensed his elder son's arrival from the field, he left the party, went out to him and pleaded him to join them. His heart went out to both of his sons. He loved them both. He hoped to see them together as brothers around the same table.⁴⁹ He wanted them to experience that different as they were, they belonged to the same household and were children of the same father.

4.2. THE FATHER'S INVITATION FOR A CELEBRATION

His father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began. (Lk. 15: 22-24)

The term celebration refers to an event such as a party, a banquet that marks an occasion of great festivity and rejoicing. It is a human instinct to rejoice in new

⁴⁸ Johnson, op. cit., p.237

⁴⁹ Henri, op. cit., p.102

life and new stages in life.⁵⁰ In this story of the prodigal, the family is celebrating the new life because the father says 'my son was dead and he has come back to life.' The father did not even give his son a chance to apologise. He put aside the son's plea as irrelevant in the light of the joy at his return. The father not only forgave and welcomed him home, he could not but wait to give him new life in abundance. Johnson says that the story calls us to celebrate or make merry.⁵¹

The father in the story of the prodigal is a very wealthy man with extensive property and many servants. The father called for a lavish feast. In the celebration the father restored the son to the status of son. According to Jeremias, the father's orders to his servants showed forgiveness and reinstatement. The best robe signifies honour. The best robe could well have been the father's own which he wore on feast days and other grand occasions. The purpose is that as the guests arrive at the banquet to see and congratulate the son on his return, the father's robe will assume acceptance by the community. Thus the father placed his son in his own place.

The ring was a sign of authority. Probably a signet ring, a sign of power and status. It also designated complete trust. Sandals were a sign of a free person; (shoes were considered to be a luxury of free men.) Normally, slaves went barefoot. The slaves placing sandals on his feet indicated their job as slaves. Therefore, they were to accept him as their master.⁵²

In this story, the father did not order to slaughter sheep or goats but a fattened calf. Some scholars indicate that the people rarely ate meat.⁵³ It was a big sacrifice on the part of the father to kill a calf. The father wanted to make the celebration a

⁵⁰ Michael Downey, (ed.,) *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993, p.130

⁵¹ Johnson, op cit., p.238

⁵² Scott, op. cit . p. 118

solemn one. The fatted calf was slaughtered in view of a great celebration and as a sign of welcoming him back. It was also conducted for the sake of nourishing his starving son. Above all, the use of such an animal implied that the whole community would be invited to share the joy. It indicated that the father's desire was to reconcile the boy with the whole community.⁵⁴

There is also a covenant nature in slaughtering an animal for the sake of a guest. In the ancient East, the host honoured his guest by killing a sheep at the threshold of the house, upon the guest's arrival. The guest is invited to step over the blood in entering the house. This act formed the 'blood covenant' between the guest and his host. It made them one. In the story of the prodigal, the father performed this custom to present his son as a most highly honoured guest. The fatted calf, not a sheep or goat, is slaughtered as the blood of a new covenant between a loving father and his son who was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found.⁵⁵

In a family celebration, usually, all the members are expected to be present. Yet, in this celebration we cannot but notice that the elder son is absent. While the father saw this celebration as an event of great joy, the elder son misunderstood it. He would consider the celebration as suitable if it were conducted for a person who had been labouring for the father his whole life, i.e., he himself. That was the reason he told his father 'you never gave me a young goat to kill and celebrate with my friends.'

The feast symbolised great joy. In the find of the lost sheep and lost coin there is joy. But in the case of the prodigal the joy is excessive in view of the son's sinfulness. This celebration signals the eschatological aspect of the Messianic

⁵³ Jerwmias, *op cit.* p.130

⁵⁴ Bailey, *op cit.*, p.185

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p.186

Banquet that awaits us at the End time. Jesus welcomes the outcast of the society as real and true friends to what are in fact anticipatory celebrations of God's reign.⁵⁶ Therefore the feast, in this story, transcends the mere physical nourishing. Those who have been considered as nothing in the eyes of the world will be the ones to be invited to take part in that banquet, not the self proclaimed righteous. Jesus emphasises that it is not through the external observance of law that we will taste the Lord's Banquet but by the mercy of God since it is a free gift from the Lord. The younger son represents the outcast, sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes while the elder son represents the self-proclaimed righteous. There is no exclusiveness in the table fellowship of Jesus.⁵⁷ All are welcomed. Yet, priority was given to the poor, outcasts and public sinner. The feast is an invitation to conversion for all those who consider themselves righteous.

4.3. THE FATHER AS THE REPRESENTATION OF GOD

The father in the parable of the Prodigal Son is not God the Father, but an earthly father. Still some of the expressions used are meant to reveal that in his love he is an image of God. The parable describes with touching simplicity what God is like.

4.3.1. God as the Father

The father of the prodigal is not an ordinary father but quite an extraordinary one. What Jesus is depicting here is the extravagant love of God. God is our Father with limitless love. The Parable of the Prodigal emphasises the reality that God's love is redeeming and healing. The moment in which the human being is most helpless is

⁵⁶ E.P. Sander, *Jesus and Judaism*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, p.208

⁵⁷ Edwards Demos, *The Jesus Wisdom of God and Eccological Theology*, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, p. 57

precisely the moment in which God is most creative in us. Where we become totally powerless, God becomes ever powerful. Where we cannot do anything any longer, God is there for us. The times we fall utterly, he stands to hold us. Nothing can separate us from his love: neither sin nor evil; not even life or death. We do not fear our good friends, let alone our fathers. God is our father, A true father never abandons his children. God is more than a human father, and He wills the good of all. Therefore, we should be happy to follow God's will and return to him. He did not make us to be exiles from him through sin. He created us for himself, for full contemplation and possession of himself. Only by remaining faithful to his love can that reality be fully realised.

God is a generous Father. In the parable, the father not only gives his departing son everything he asks, but also showers him with gifts on his return. And to his elder son he says: "all I have is yours." There is nothing the father keeps for himself. At the same time, he urged the elder son to accept his unique place in his father's heart and join his younger brother around the table.

God's forgiving mercy is unconditional. It comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself. A heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that we have to practice in our daily life. The parable instils (encourages) confidence in sinners to approach God (with trust), to embrace the mercy of God and be freed from their sins. It reveals God's attitude of forgetting our past follies. For him, gone are the past sinful deeds. Our heavenly Father cleanses us and crowns us with his graces in our repentance.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Nouwen, op. cit., p. 128

God's unlimited acceptance of the sinner enables us to take heart. "My son was dead...but is alive". In those four words such as dead and alive; lost and found we have the whole story of redeeming and regenerating grace. God is willing to pick up poor, lost sinners who are dead in trespasses and sins and breathe into their souls eternal life. God will take rebels and reinstate them into His family. All we have to do is come - just as we are.⁵⁹

4.3.2. God as the Mother

God is an affectionate Mother. When the great painter Rembrandt came to capture this Gospel story he depicted the returned son kneeling before his father who has his two hands resting on the young man's shoulders. On close examination, however, we see that one of the father's hands is a mother's one. Reflecting on the painting, Henri tells us that the left hand of the father is that of the father. But the right hand of the father is a mother's hand because it is soft, very tender and lies gently upon his son's shoulder. It longs to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. The prodigal's father represents God in whom both womanhood and motherhood are fully present. She caresses us and consoles us with a feminine hand.⁶⁰ God the Mother is the prototype of all motherhood. Often She praises the solicitous love of a human mother: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness or the child of her womb?" (Is.49: 15) She also reminds us of the possibility of the failure of a human mother. So She asserts her faithful motherly love: " Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name" (Is. 49: 15b and 16)

⁵⁹ Philip. op. cit., p 141

⁶⁰ Nouwen, op. cit , p 99

The father enrobing his young son reminds us of Jesus' words about God's maternal love: "...how many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings,..." (Mt. 23: 37-38) A vigilant mother bird's wings portrays security for her little ones. This is the safety, care, and protection that God offers us Her children under wings of love. When we are able to experience the motherly love of God, we are inspired to sing together with the Psalmist: God the Mother "will shelter you with pinions, spread wings that you may take refuge."(Ps. 91:4) God the mother caresses us her children, surrounds us with the warmth of her body, and holds us against the womb from which we sprang.

God in her infinite compassion has linked herself for eternity with the life of her children. When her children leave, this choice causes her grief. When they return, this choice brings her gladness. But her joy will not be complete until all who have received life from her have returned home and gather together around the table prepared for them.

Many Asian women well portray not only God the Father, but also His Son Jesus Christ with the image of mother. They say "God weeps with our pain." Jesus was different from those saints and heroes who bore only their own suffering; Jesus took on himself the pain and suffering of all his neighbours (all humankind). Jesus is a compassionate mother who really feels the hurt and pain of her children. Jesus' heart breaks anew when he hears the cry of humanity and he is the One who shared the suffering of all humanity. An Asian poet depicts in his prayer the mother image of Jesus as follows:

And thou, Jesus, sweet Lord, art Thou not also a mother?

Truly, Thou art a mother, the mother of all mothers

*Who tasted death, in Thy desire to give life to Thy children*⁶¹.

4.4. HOMECOMING AS THE ULTIMATE GOAL IN CHRISTIAN LIFE

The parable of the prodigal son designates that we have an eternal Home and a Father who is waiting in love and affection for our homecoming. Home is the centre of our being. It is there that we constantly hear the voice "You are my beloved (son); with you I am well pleased." (Lk. 3: 22) It is a voice of love that gives life to us. Homecoming is an inevitable and vital reality of Christian life. It is the entire goal of every Christian, no matter who we are and where we are. Homecoming means for us walking step by step toward the One who awaits us with open arms and wants to hold us in an eternal embrace.

4.4.1. God as our ultimate Home

St. Augustine says, O God "You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You." The secret of our parable is this there is a homecoming for us all because there is a Home. The door of the kingdom which leads to the Father's house which has many rooms (Jn. 14:2) still stands open as there is one who has died and risen to open it and who still says 'I am the true and living way to the Father.' The human heart was made to be at Home with God. It is this aspiration which is at the heart of all yearning. We wish for home as our first wish, hope for home until our last hope, dream of home with every dream we form

Artur Lundkvist says that 'we are travelling all the time.' Of course we are journeying toward Home (God) each and every moment of our life. Our only goal and desire is to reach God. We are created to return to our real home. That is why in the gospel we read "Remain in me"(Jn. 15: 4a). The words of Jesus clarify the nature

⁶¹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, Asian Faces of Jesus, New York. Orbis Books, 1993, p.235

of our being. "They do not belong to this world any more than I belong to the world" (Jn. 17:16). Ontologically we do not belong to this world but we are only pilgrims and strangers here as St. Paul says. Jesus continues "As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world" (Jn. 17:18). This shows that our being in the world is not an accidental but an essential existence willed and planned by God. We are entrusted with a mission to complete here on earth. Having accomplished it we will return to our Home.

It is because of this that we find ourselves in restless movement. We go from one thing to another, from one enthusiasm to another, from one person to another and after all these movements we realise that what we want is 'not this', 'not that' but something higher than this and that. We can interpret this restlessness of heart as a need to realise that God is our heart's desire and it is Him we are seeking and not finding in 'this' and 'that.' What we want is God alone.

The persons who strive to amass wealth and power, after having accumulated them feel that this was not their need but something else and so they strive for something else. The people having won popularity and status in the society feel empty and restless and search for something else. Humankind tries to find gratification and fulfilment in sexual indulgence and alcoholism. We are not content with these and so slip into other things in order to find happiness, but still we remain unsatisfied and unhappy. This is our real experience.

We belong to God for He says; "You are mine" (Is. 43:1a). Perhaps we are not aware of it at the conscious level. Therefore unconsciously, the soul craves to reach where it belongs. Other achievements do not give us real happiness but only momentary joy. The heart knows that it is actually looking for something else. It tries

other things that attract it. The result is the same experience of emptiness and restlessness. The heart ceaselessly keeps trying to get happiness in things of this world but reaches nowhere. All these point to the nature of our heart. Its nature and only goal is to reach our Home, God. Its search for momentary happiness in transitory things is a proof of its real search for God who is the true and everlasting happiness and Home.

4.4.2. Attitude as a means to Homecoming

When we speak of homecoming, we can as well speak of it as an attitude. It is an attitude which depends upon how much we are able to feel at home with ourselves as well as with others. Home is something which happens to a person.

The parable highlights our own events of home-leaving as the younger son and the elder. We often experience home-leaving in life. Home-leaving is not a historical event bound to time and place. On our spiritual journey we experience the younger son. We wander far and wide, meet people with all different life-styles and conviction. We become part of many movements. But at the end of it all, we feel homeless and very tired. We also experience the elder son in our spiritual journey of life. We are obedient to our parents, teachers, and bishops and to God. We never ran away from home, never wasted our time and money on sensual pursuits. Our entire life, we are responsible, traditional and homebound. But often we too are jealous, angry, over sensitive, self-righteous, complaining, and resentful. We are the elder son but just as lost as the younger brother, even though we stayed "home" all our life. We have been working on our father's farm, but have never fully tasted the joy of being at home.

It is possible for some children to play the prodigal son and estrange themselves from their parents. The parable insists that no matter what the son has done, he is still the child of the father. Love suffices for everything. Love paid the ransom for his salvation and renewal. The parents are not to treat them brutally or as outcast. Rather, their genuine love and compassion is the best means to convert and to bring the delinquent children home. As happened to the prodigal son, the memory of the parents' benignity should encourage them to return home to God and to one another. At those moments the parents should realise that the time has come to claim their true vocation to be compassionate as the Heavenly Father. "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." They are to welcome their children home without asking them questions and without wanting anything from them in return. As the true children of God, the children are all invited to become the younger son without being rebellious. Also, the invitation is to be the elder son without being resentful. All of us are called to be obedient to our Heavenly Father but never to be His slave because we are His heirs and co-heirs

When we return from a far country and get rid of all our resentment for our brothers and sisters we experience home. When we allow others to love us, we are at home. For the prodigal son, repentance means learning to say "Father" again; then for the elder son it means learning to say "brother." For a true homecoming, we need to learn to accept our own brothers and sisters without prejudice and resentment. We cannot be the children of God without being brothers and sisters for one another.

4.4.3. The Sacrament of Reconciliation as a Means to Homecoming

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is an essential element that brings us to the proper path on our way Home. Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we are

reconciled with God and his Church through his forgiveness. Reconciliation means to make up a broken friendship. The Church explains the two important words in the passage of the gospel of Matthew 16: 13-20. "The words 'bind' and 'loose' mean: whomsoever you exclude from your communion will be excluded from communion with God; whomsoever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his communion. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God" (CCC1445).

Conversion is the stepping stone to the sacrament of reconciliation. It is the first step needed to return to the Father's love. It designates a change of direction or a turning around. The younger son in the parable of the prodigal is a perfect example of such conversion. The story of the elder son is a clear example of the exact opposite of what Jesus meant by conversion. The elder son felt that he was doing his duty by obeying his father, and did not feel the need to change his heart, to be converted. God wants an interior, heartfelt repentance, and a change of heart, conversion. The story displays clearly what conversion is all about: when a person is going farther and farther away from God the Father, he stops, realises his mistake and changes direction. He goes back to God. This Sacrament enables us to do exactly that.

Another important aspect in this sacrament is the penance. The younger son gives a good example of true repentance. To repent for one's sins means to be truly sorry for having committed them. This is called perfect contrition: the deep and real sorrow needed to return to God's friendship. The Church teaches us: "Contrition is sorrow of the soul and the detestation of the sin committed, together the resolution not to sin again." (CCC 1451)

Again, another significant element for the forgiveness of sins is the actual confessing. The very fact of openly confessing our sins makes us more aware of what we have done. This also frees us from the feelings of shame. "Even from the human point of view, the confession of sins, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others. Through this a person opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible" (CCC1455)

CONCLUSION

In the Great Indian Epic, "Ramayana", when Sita the wife of king Rama was kidnapped by Ravana, the evil king of Lanka, Rama made a request to his close friend, Hanuman, to rescue her. Hanuman being ignorant of his nobility and origin refused to bound across the ocean to reach Lanka in order to rescue Sita. At this point, the noble elder named Jambavan, tells Hanuman the story of his birth and origin; how the wind-god had begotten him and his mother Anjana had borne him in the mountains and when he was still a child he had thought the sun to be a fruit growing in the sky, and sprang easily three thousand leagues toward it. Jambavan's story made Hanuman become aware of his identity and origin as a son of god and that he belong to a god's family. Thus this story enabled Hanuman to accomplish a miracle. He proved his prowess and bounded across the ocean and rescued Sita.

With the fall of the first parents, humanity remained in the state of ignorance of its identity and origin. By telling the story of the prodigal son, Jesus made the humankind aware of its origin and birth as children of God. He tells us that there is a loving and merciful Father waiting with outstretched hands to embrace His children. Once we become aware of this fact then Jesus invites us to accomplish a miracle in our life day by day. The greatest miracle to take place in each one of us is our own conversion and transformation as in the life of the younger son.

In the story of the prodigal we perceive the younger son presenting to his father a prepared scenario. But the father did not seem to hear anything. It appeared as if the father was deaf. The son thought that he was a sinner returning to the father but the father did not see a sinner returning but only his son. So the father gives the order to his servants to treat him honourably as a member of the family. There was

no correspondence between what the son said and what the father did. The father was thinking only about the good things he wanted to give his son. Not once did the father verbally say: "My son I forgive you". This is the eternal love with which the Father loves us his children. God is too gentle to call his son / daughter a "sinner".

God cannot send anybody from his house. It is human beings who choose to go out of his home. God allows that in the infinite hope that one-day they will come back, because only in God can human beings find their fulfilment. The everlasting love of God transcends sin. Christianity needs to be more optimistic with the message of God's everlasting love. Love is eternal but sin is temporal. Sin will come to an end but love has no end, it is eternal.

The prodigal son went to his father as he was "he got up and went back to his father" (v. 20a). He was dirty, filthy, clumsy, smelling. On the way, the father rushed to embrace and kiss him. Initially, He did not bother about cleansing his son but accepted and welcomed him as he was. Then the father began to work on him: washing, dressing and crowning. God the Father welcomes us as we are, in our own human condition. Once we make up our mind to get up and go to him just as we are, then He will do the rest. God joyfully and graciously takes up the task of the whole process of cleansing us.

The father's response to his son was far more receptive than the son had dared even to imagine. The father's celebration conveys the joy in heaven. The picture is one of sheer grace. No penance is required; it is enough that the son has come home. If his is the picture of God's joy in receiving a sinner coming home, then we can all look forward with great expectation to that day. In the end we all return home as

sinners, so Jesus' parable invites us to trust that God's goodness and mercy will be at least as great as that of a loving human father.

The younger son stands for all those today who are fed up with establishment and impatient of law and order. The elder son represents all those unadventurous conventional Christians who end up disliking their rebellious contemporaries. For the abiding truth behind the parable is the drift and destiny of human affairs; and brooding over many infinite things, there is a Holy and Eternal Father. The decisive, existential question is, do we want to come Home? We are all predestined in love, to life, sooner or later, if we will.

The elder brother represents all of us who think we can make it on our own, all of us who might be proud of the kind of life we live. The parable leaves us with the question whether the elder brother joined the celebration. Did he go in and welcome his brother home, or did he stay outside pouting and feeling wronged? The parable ends there because that is the decision each of us must make. The missing conclusion of the parable is a strong evidence that we all are called to identify with the elder son. If we enter in, we accept grace as the Father's rule for life in the family.

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