



[Splinters of Gospel]

"The Gospel is like a bomb: the hope is that at least some splinters will hit us"

The Parable of the merciful Father

Lk 15:11-32

This parable touches the roots of our faith. Our idea of God is often obscured by fairly idolatrous images that form barriers between us and the face of the Father. Jesus invites listeners not to be scandalized by the goodness of the Father, by a love that cannot lie in the narrow parameters of human justice, but one that exceeds it.

- We think we see God all in the same way, but this is not the case. Each of us has his own ideas about God.
- Jesus brought a new way of seeing God, the only true way summarized in the word "Father".
- This way of viewing God as a Father who loves us, has been the scandal and the novelty of Christianity; the first consequence is seeing all others as brothers.
- The parable of the merciful Father is one of the pages that best describes the characteristics of this Father.

The first two verses of chapter 15, provide the context of the parable, the motivation that led Jesus to tell it:

(Lk 15:1-2) The tax collectors and sinners, however, were all crowding round to listen to him, and the Pharisees and scribes complained saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them'.

- At the time of Jesus, sinners were all those who did not want to, or could not, observe the law, either for their wrong behaviour, or because of their jobs that were considered impure (e.g.: prostitutes, publicans, shepherds, leather tanners, etc.).
- They were excluded from the temple and synagogues, and were kept at a safe distance.
- If you are a sinner, you are excluded from God and from the community.
- Tradition taught that sinners were eliminated physically at the coming of the Messiah

- The word "*complained*" describes the shocked disapproval towards a behaviour contrary to tradition.
- The accusation to Jesus is clear: "welcomes sinners and eats with them." In Jewish culture, eating together is communion of life; eating the same dish, the impurity of one is transmitted to another.
- The Pharisees attempt to discredit Jesus; He cannot be from God because he eats with sinners and so is impure, i.e.: cannot be in relationship with God.

(Is 13:9) Look, the Day of Yahweh is coming, merciless, with wrath and burning anger, to reduce the country to a desert and root out the sinners from it.

(Ps 139:19) If only, God, you would kill the wicked!



- ◆ "Scribes" and "Pharisees" accuse Jesus of not being a spiritual Teacher because his behaviour towards sinners is against the whole biblical and religious tradition.
- ◆ Jesus, in fact, already recognized as the Messiah, doesn't threaten sinners, doesn't eliminate them, nor invites them to do penance, but instead organises a feast, which, in all cultures, is celebrated with a banquet.
- ◆ Jesus therefore changes the concept of sin; it doesn't consist in the transgression of the Law, but in iniquitous behaviour that hurts others.

- ◆ The Evangelists insist a lot on the polemic between Jesus and the Pharisees.
- ◆ They aren't interested in the historical movement of the Pharisees, from which the Christian community had already distanced itself, but the fact that the category of "merit" was being revived in the Christian community. And this is the meaning of Jesus phrase, *'Keep your eyes open, and be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees'* (Mt 16:6).

- ◆ Jesus responds to the Pharisees' allegations, and to those who believed that God's love must be deserved, presenting the style of God towards sinners through the three parables in chapter 15: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Drachma and, more fully, that of The Merciful Father.
- ◆ All three parables explain how God treats those who get lost, including those who do so of their own choice.
- ◆ Every religion has its own penitential rites with which man must atone for his guilt and re-establish communion with God. Jesus with these parables says that God's forgiveness doesn't depend on the merits of man, but is accepted as a free gift of his love.



- ✿ The parable splits into two symmetrical parts.
- ✿ In the first part the younger son, the one '*who leaves home*', is on stage.
- ✿ During the second part the elder son comes into play, the one '*who remained at home*'.
- ✿ Neither of the two sons shows a deep understanding of their father.
- ✿ The figure of the father is always central.

- ✿ In Luke's Gospel, there are other episodes where there are two opposing characters: the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (*Lk 18:9-14*), the woman with a bad name in the house of Simon the Pharisee (*Lk 7:36-50*), the two thieves on the cross (*Lk 23:39-43*).
- ✿ Luke presents contrasts to help us reflect.

- ✿ Since it is the figure of the father who gives unity to the whole narrative, the more appropriate title of the parable would be "merciful father", rather than the traditional "prodigal son".
- ✿ The father is the real protagonist. He is present in all three scenes of the parable, while his younger son disappears after meeting with him, and his elder son enters into the picture only in the last part.
- ✿ Furthermore he appears in the first and the last verse of this piece; this forms an "inclusion".
- ✿ The vicissitudes of both children collide with the novelty presented by this father's attitude

- ✿ The parable touches the roots of our faith, of our idea of God, often obscured by visions a little idolatrous that form barriers between us and the true face of the Father.
- ✿ Jesus invites us not to be shocked by the goodness of the father, for a love that cannot lie in the narrow parameters of human justice, but surpasses it.



Strange family: there is no mother. It looks a lot like Jesus' community, where God is Father and Mother, and all others are brothers

The father's silence emphasizes full respect for the son's freedom. If he had been against, the son would have been obliged, by law, to remain

The father exemplifies the person who loves and feels obliged to respect the freedom of the loved one, even if he uses this freedom to reject the love which he is the subject of

The expression "a distant country" is a biblical expression that means "a pagan country", in particular the country of exile and idolatry (Jr 46:27); the younger son, walks away not only from his father but also from the God of Israel.

The younger son starts to resemble the publicans and sinners who approached Jesus and about whom the Pharisees complained

[11] Then he said, 'There was a man who had two sons.

[12] The younger one said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me." So the father divided the property between them.

[13] A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery

The younger son's greed does not allow him to wait for his father's death; for him he's already dead

His father divided the inheritance between the two brothers. The first one leaves, the other remains

The silence of his elder son is also surprising; he doesn't prevent his brother's departure: perhaps he was glad to remain the principal heir

The expression "got together everything he had" means he has turned his inheritance into cash

So much haste to get his hands on his inheritance ... so much haste with which he dissipated it



[14] When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch

[15] so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs.

The expression "he hired himself," is literally "attached himself". It is a verb used by the old testament to signify the abandonment of God and adherence to foreign gods (1K 11:2; 2K 3:3)

In his father's House he was a master and had servants; After leaving his House, he makes himself a servant. He left a father behind and ends up finding a master.

The youngster finds himself on pagan land; in fact, breeding pigs was prohibited in Israel (Lv 11:7; Dt 14:8; Mt 7:6; Lk 8:32), because the animal was deemed unclean

The young man is doing the most demeaning and, socially and religiously, degrading job for a Jew

While he was at home he could collect everything; as soon as he left, he frittered it all away, showing that he wasn't even a smart person who can look after himself

If one makes money the centre of his life, when the money is gone, he no longer exists as a person. It is typical behaviour of all time: money is elevated to be the essential dimension of life. Jesus is very clear:

(Lk 16:13) *No servant can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second, or be attached to the first and despise the second. You cannot be the slave both of God and of money».*

Luke's four Beatitudes are followed by Jesus saying "Alas" (Lk 6:24-26). The Greek expression (οὐα ...) means funerary lament, keening. Jesus mourns the rich; by taking life away from others, the rich take their own lives as well.

In their environment, as much as in ours, what lent importance to a person was the amount of money that one had

The money had made the youngster feel important. Since he no longer has any, he feels a nobody. Loosing the money meant a loss of identity

(Pr 19:4) *Wealth multiplies friends, but the one friend the poor has is taken away*

"Money" translates the word "Mammon" that has the same root as the word "Amen" and means "what is certain", "what is safe"

For Jesus, "Mammon" is an Idol that devours and destroys all those who worship it

The youngster is the victim of the "God Mammon". The God of profit has devoured who confided in him; not only money but also his identity



The fruits of the carob tree have a sweetish flavour; they were used primarily as livestock fodder

For the Jews this is the bottom of the abyss. A rabbinical saying: "when the Israelites are reduced to eating husks, then repent"

The hunger pangs make the youngster come to his senses; the risk of death is highlighted by Luke by repeating the word "die" three times (Lk 15:17,24,32)

"I will go", is literally the word "return", used by the Prophet Hosea for his adulteress wife:

(Ho 2:9) *Then if she chases her lovers she will not catch them, if she looks for them she will not find them, and then she will say, 'I shall go back to my first husband'.*

The Prophet Hosea understands, from his tragic marital situation, that it is not true that repentance is the condition for forgiveness, but first there is forgiveness and then possibly there is repentance and conversion

[16] And he would willingly have filled himself with **the husks** the pigs were eating but **no one would let him have them.**

(Si 12:4-5a) *Give to the devout, do not go to the help of a sinner. Do good to the humble, give nothing to the godless. Refuse him bread, do not give him any,*

[17] Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's hired men **have all the food they want** and more, and here am I dying of hunger

[18] I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have **sinned against heaven and against you;**

The son's words recall those of the Pharaoh in the book of Exodus

(Ex 10:16) *Pharaoh sent urgently for Moses and Aaron and said, 'I have sinned against Yahweh your God and against you'*

"and against you". Erased from the book of God, he is also certain to have been blotted out by his family

The boy's condition is the same as that of the unclean animals: he's like a pig lusting for food

According to biblical tradition, the lack of assistance was seen as a divine curse. The youngster is destitute because he's being punished by God

The fact that the servants in his House have plenty to eat is a sign that his father treats his employees with great generosity

"To sin against heaven" is a biblical expression (Ex 10:16; 15 7:6; 24:12; Dt 1:41) that means "to sin against God", a very serious crime for which the Lord had planned this punishment:

(Ex 32:33) *Yahweh said to Moses, 'Those who have sinned against me are the ones I shall blot out of my book.'*



"I no longer deserve to be called your son"; having received his share of the inheritance, he could no longer claim any right awarded to his position as 'son'

[19] I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men.
[20] So he left the place and went back to his father

Not knowing his father well enough, he is still convinced he has lost his love and that he should get it back again by working as a servant

The youngster thinks only in economic terms: driven by hunger and not by remorse for the pain caused to his father or his family

The return of his younger son is often presented as the route to repentance and a way forward to return unto God; but it is not so

He makes a calculation with a cool head, and develops a clear plan: "Here I am starving, at home I was better off and, even though I no longer have the legal right to be his son, I will go back to him and he will certainly take me on as a hired hand, at least I can eat"

In the speech he had prepared, there was nothing that expressed the pain that he might have caused to his father, but it was simply self-interest

The Evangelist does not use any of the specific terms that would indicate "conversion", "penance", "repentance" or an "inner change of attitude"



The father has always remained in expectation of his son's return. He respected his freedom, but did not abandon him. God may be abandoned, but he does not abandon

[20a] While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. He ran to the boy

"To Have compassion" is a technical word which in the Old Testament indicates an attitude pertinent to God (Ex 34:6; Dt 7:7; Is 54:8; Jr 31:2) and in the New Testament to Jesus

To describe the attitude of men, you would use another verb, that can be translated with "to have mercy"

"To Have compassion" indicates a divine action that gives life back in a death situation. The Hebrew root indicates a turmoil in the mother's womb

The son does not meet a judge, nor an angry father with ready conditions to be imposed for his readmission

The Father has no other way to relate with men other than a constant and increasing communication of his love whatever their behaviour

In the oriental mentality, running is unthinkable and dishonourable. Even worse for a married man or a father.

Only servants run; by running, the father makes himself a servant to his son. This is the image of a God who puts himself to the service of his own children

The Father's love is such that makes him forget all social conventions. In order to honour his son, the father gives up his own honour.

In Luke's Gospel, this word appears three times, always in episodes in which there is a restitution of life. In the resurrection of the son of the widow of Naim (Lk 7:13), in the parable of the Samaritan (Lk 10:33) and in this parable

If there is a hint of a new orientation toward God, regardless of the reason, perhaps only for self interest, then on the part of God a shift towards compassion begins



This expression recalls the first episode of forgiveness in the Bible; this also is a story about inheritance: the episode of the sons of Isaac, Esau and Jacob (see Gn 27:33-35)

The inheritance was due to the first born Esau. Jacob, taking advantage of the fact that the father was blind, deceives him posing as his brother and receives the blessing, a gesture that meant the conferral of the inheritance

Jacob runs away to avoid his brother's revenge. He saw him from far away with more than four hundred men. For Jacob, this is the end. But the Bible says

(Gn 33:4) But Esau ran to meet him, took him in his arms, threw himself on his neck and wept as he kissed him

The "kiss", in biblical language, indicates that forgiveness is granted (2S 14:33)

The sequence is important: the Father bestows forgiveness before his son's request. In the same way, God does not wait for men to repent and ask for forgiveness, but he grants it in advance

[20b] clasped him in his arms and kissed him.

The boy worked with pigs; and therefore was unclean. The father, by embracing him, becomes unclean himself. But he accepts to be unclean to make his son clean

The attitude of the father is surprising; he may appear more reckless than good. But God behaves in this way: he loves the sinner while he is still so, even before he repents

He manages to say only half of his speech; the Father stops him and embraces him. When a sinner meets God, he doesn't need to say anything, but only listen: it is God who will speak

The youngster embodies the unhealthy idea from religion that forgiveness should be deserved. He thinks in terms of merit and to be worthy or otherwise, and also in economic terms; for him to be son or not depends on the inheritance

The son finds a father that regenerates him with his love; he doesn't let him finish the speech that he had prepared; he doesn't ask him what he has done or if he repented; but, by kissing him, he forgives him without even knowing why he's back. The father is interested in his son and not in his guilty past or the detailed list of his misdemeanors

[21] Then his son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son."

Although he found an almost maternal love, he believes that he's not worthy of his father's forgiveness and therefore seeks to deserve it by offering to serve him, as Jacob did with Esau by offering his camp (Gn 33:8)



The father, who has already granted forgiveness, carries out a series of gestures for restoring life, love, dignity and freedom to his son who had lost everything

The Bible presents several times a king who, as a reward for a general's victory, gives him "the best robe"

"The best robe" was an honour that indicated the bestowal, or the full restoration of dignity of the person who received it (see 1M 6:14-15)

It has a reference to the story of Joseph and the Pharaoh. Joseph was slandered and imprisoned; when he was found innocent, the Pharaoh puts him at the head of Egypt with these gestures

(Gen 41:42) Pharaoh took the ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain round his neck

It is not a matter of changing dirty clothes with clean ones, but the granting of honour which signifies great authority and dignity

[22] But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet"

Also the gesture "put a ring on his finger" is a reminder of the Old Testament

(Est. 8,2) The king, who had recovered his ring from Haman, took it off and gave it to Mordecai; while Esther gave Mordecai charge of Haman's house

The ring is not a piece of jewellery, but the equivalent of the family check book. In the ring there was the seal of the house, which was put on wax or on clay as a guarantee in purchases

By squandering everything, the son showed his ineptitude; the Father by giving him the ring puts him at the head of the administration of the house

The three gestures show the three fundamental aspects of Christian forgiveness: the return of the lost honour, the expression of an even greater trust, and full freedom

There are three actions on the verge of madness which indicate that the Father's love goes beyond human categories. This is the true forgiveness of God; consequently, it should be the true forgiveness of men

"Put Sandals on his feet". Sandals are elements of luxury, because only masters wore them and not the servants; they were a sign of freedom

The father wants his son to be considered neither a servant nor a guest, but master of his house. The son hoped to be readmitted as a servant; the Father makes him once again a master, i.e. a fully free person

In addition, the removal of sandals was an expression of mourning. Wearing them again meant the end of the period of sadness. The father had lived the absence of his son as a mourning; his return brings joy



Eating meat was in fact very rare; the killing of the "fatted calf", indicates already an exceptional event (Gn 18:7)

The theme of the "fatted calf" is important because it appears three times in the narrative

On the one hand it satisfies the great hunger which the boy had suffered away from home; on the other hand it indicates that for the father the return of his Son is equivalent to a religious feast, the feast that God has called for by the prophet Hosea:

(Ho 6:6) *for faithful love is what pleases me, not sacrifice; knowledge of God, not burnt offerings*

The "fatted calf" is normally used to honour God, the father uses it to honour his sinner son

[23] Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast.

The encounter with the sinner is equivalent to an encounter with God and requires a feast. The father does not impose penances but invites you to celebrate

This is the charge they press against Jesus: he welcomes sinners and dines with them

[24] because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate

In the light of Luke's Gospel, the expression "was dead" means one who has not found the way to the Kingdom (Lk 9:60; 9:23-26; 14:26-27; 14:33).

The attitude of God towards a sinner is to communicate life to him and then have a feast, because the feast is a manifestation of exuberant life

The son had claimed his inheritance as if his father "were dead"; in reality, he was the one who chose to go towards death. Now he has come back to life with a new birth; one can only celebrate

The meeting of sinners with God does not consist in listing humiliatingly their infidelities, but in the exhilarating experience of his love

The threefold citation of the term "death" present in this story, is cancelled out by the triple repetition of the term "feast" (Lk 15:23; 15:24; 15:32)



The normal reaction would be to feel attracted by "music" and "dances", but he is not used to this; a grey and sombre person in his outlook;

[25] Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing.

"The elder son", in Greek "presbyter". It is a reminder to the elders of the people who with Scribes and Sadducees formed the Sanhedrin. While God forgives, the Sanhedrin never forgives, but judges and condemns.

For the religious person, the Father's house is the house of seriousness; it is inconceivable that there can be "music" and "dances"

[26] Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about
[27] The servant told him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound
[28A] He was angry then and refused to go in

Luke doesn't only present an elder brother in age, but the religious institution that judges and condemns. The parable is directed toward them

The presence of "music" and "dances" was supposed to make him understand that his brother had returned, but he, unlike the father, didn't expect or wish his return

In addition to the historical groups, it is directed to those in the Christian community who believe to be righteous

Out of the gestures performed by the father, the one that has surprised the servants was that he "killed the fatted calf"

The refusal "to go in" recalls the charge that Jesus has moved against scribes and Pharisees:

(Lk 11:52) "Alas for you lawyers who have taken away the key of knowledge! You have not gone in yourselves and have prevented others from going in who wanted to".

The joy of the father is not shared by the elder son; this is in contrast with all his rage. The two sons are similar in that the first one had left home, the second one doesn't want to go in

Furthermore, they claimed that the arrival of the Kingdom of God was prevented by the presence of sinners, but Jesus tells them:

(Mt 21:31 (B)) In truth I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you.

There are always plenty of those who carry the cause of God's justice, of course toward others, more than that of his goodness and mercy

Those who live their own relationship with God under the banner of sacrifice and renunciation cannot bear to hear that God's love, which they think they are entitled to for their merits, can also be granted to those who, by their own behaviour, do not deserve it



The father had the authority to compel him, but he doesn't. Instead he "came out to urge him"

[28B] and his father came out and began to urge him to come in.

The same love that made the father run towards his younger son now drives him to go out and "urge" his elder one; the first gesture was as absurd as the second was unthinkable; but he does not make distinctions

As the joy of the father contrasts with the anger of his elder son, so the joy of Jesus to be with sinners contrasts with the anger of religious people, who strive to deserve the love of God

He does not behave as a master but as a servant. The Lord makes himself a servant so that the servants feel like lords

"Slaved" indicates the work of slaves, different from the verb "to serve" understood as a voluntary act (Lk 22:27)

[29] But he retorted to his father, "All these years I have **slaved** for you and never once **disobeyed any orders** of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends

This is a picture of the warp that religion can produce. The gripe is expressed with the image of service, orders and reward, which are the foundations of religion

He does not see his Father as the origin of his life, but as an employer

He also had his part of the inheritance; his is a childish complaint. He did not need to get a kid from his Father as it was already his; he never used his possessions because he has never gained freedom and human dignity

We need to serve God by keeping his commands; as a response from God, there is a reward. This is the Pharisaic spirituality that convinces us that we are good

In the name of the law, Scribes and Pharisees make useless the inheritance that the Father has given to his people, i.e., his love. It is worth noting the plight of the inheritance: the younger son has wasted it; the other didn't use it

He didn't understand that he does not need to obey because the father does not give orders; he doesn't need to serve because he is the master



This is the paralysis that affects those who live in awe and fear of God. Simply obeying leads to immaturity; unable to organise a feast, he waits for someone to authorize it

In the culture of that time, the father was the authority to which everything must be referred to; that is why Jesus says

(Mk 10:29 -30) Jesus said, 'In truth I tell you, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times as much, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land -- and persecutions too -- now in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life.'

The Father appears in the list of what has been left, but not in the list of what you receive. The figure of the father is excluded from the community of believers, who recognize only one Father

(Mt 23:9) You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven

[29] but he retorted to his father, "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends.

Both brothers do not have a filial attitude towards their Father, but one of servants toward their master. The younger son hopes to be treated as a servant; the elder one, more tragically, behaves as a slave

[30] But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property - he and his loose women - you kill the calf we had been fattening

The text does not specify. Jesus said "a life of debauchery"

The malice of people who have such a sharp eye that are able to see what isn't there; with a beam rammed in his eye deforming reality (Mt 7:3-5), he informs his father "how" his brother frittered away his assets

The behaviour of the elder son, is reminiscent of the labourers in the vineyard who are protesting because of the goodness of the Lord to those who worked only one hour. The master replied thus:

(Mt 20:14 -15) Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the lastcomer as much as I pay you. Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why should you be envious because I am generous?

The compassion of the master is to them a blatant injustice toward their merits and sacrifices, and, from their point of view, they are right; but God does not act according to justice, but according to love

Doesn't say "my brother" but "this son of yours" For he was dead and remains such. He no longer has a brother; he, and perhaps even his father, are objects of contempt,

It's not true because the brother has squandered his part of the inheritance

Those who have never transgressed an order feel entitled to judge their brothers



The father expresses surprise and sadness, since the son, even though he had always been with him, didn't understand that what he had was his; he had never lived like a son



The term "father" appears twelve times in the story and never in the mouth of the elder son; even his younger son had called his parent "Father";



Jesus denounced a relationship with God typical of servants with their master based on fear, submission and obedience, which paralyses and does not make you grow because it does not allow you to discover the greatness of the Father's love.



The Father invites him to enter into a new logic: not that of 'merits' - in this he would have more rights - , but in that of love; in this the brother, perhaps, has more need than him. Not in the logic of service for reward, but of in that of living together for sharing

[31] 'The father said, "**My son**, you are with me always and all I have is yours

[32] But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because **your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found**

The father turn to him with a term loaded with affection that could be translated as "*my child*" instead of the generic term "*son*"

The father declares his love for him too protesting that the younger son is not more loved than the elder; he reminds him that the other son is "*your brother*" in contrast with how he had called him "*your son*"



To scribes and Pharisees, and every one that is found in these categories, Jesus reminds that those who they consider sinners, are their brothers and they too are loved by God. He urges them not to be scandalized by the goodness of the Father, but to join the party; not to be jealous of the freedom that the Lord grants to those who accept him

Here we are at the root of the difference between the thought of God and men. This is a subversion of the criteria governed by retributive justice. It is precisely this criterion of judgement that Jesus wants to dismantle, presenting God as a Father



Reconciliation

An "open" ending

- ❑ This parable does not distinguish between the two brothers: a good one and a bad one. But it shows that only the Father is good and he loves them both.
- ❑ This parable has an "open" ending; it does not say if the younger son has remained at home, or if the elder one in the end joined the party.
- ❑ It is up to the listeners to decide who is in the right and, possibly, accept the way of God's action.
- ❑ Always in the Church there will be sons who leave and then want to return; and always there will be "learned people" that, from the height of their alleged wisdom, will have thousand of excuses to keep them away.
- ❑ God will always have a big job to make it clear to both that his love is completely different.

- ❑ The guiding thought when meeting God is that he is a Father who tells us "... *feel how much I love you*"; no shameful listing of our mean behaviours, but the exciting and enriching meeting with his love.
- ❑ It is because God is the Father that we can go through conversion and forgiveness, not vice versa.



(1Jn 3:19 -20) This will be the proof that we belong to the truth, and it will convince us in his presence, even if our own feelings condemn us, that God is greater than our feelings and knows all things.

- ❑ Our behaviours do not lead God to refusal, indignation, or even less to resentment.
- ❑ In the Gospels Jesus never invites sinners to ask for God's forgiveness, but always, continually, invites men to forgive one another so that God's forgiveness becomes both effective and visible.



God's Mercy

- Probably in our preaching, God's mercy has never been presented with same depth with which it is presented in this parable.
- God's and Jesus' generosity has found misunderstandings and objections also within the community of believers.
- The false prophets of justice, rigour or, worse, of fear of God, do not allow mixing with those who err.
- We as well may feel a certain "repulsion" in accepting God as he is; we prefer to find refuge in the law.
- The Father in this parable has an irresistible power, because what is most divine, God's love, is shown with what is most human: a "visceral" compassion.
- God is like this father in the parable; he should be understood and accepted as he is.
- It is precisely God's goodness that men are still waiting to experience in order to adhere to him and to his proposal.
- The parable aims to push the community to switch from the theology of merit to that of gift.

The Celebration

- The presence of Jesus in our midst is a source of celebration.
- Celebration for God is not easy; on one hand it is offered to a son who doesn't deserve it and hasn't called for it, on the other it creates in the other son a sense of detachment from Father and brother.
- To participate in God's celebration we need to convert to his way of loving, look with his own eyes.
- For this reason it is important to tap into the Gospel which makes us see the logic of God: we would never be able to imagine a Father like this.

Envy and the evil eye of the righteous (1)

- Anyone who feels righteous in front of the law, believes that offering forgiveness to sinners demeans his effort of fidelity.
 - At the root of this attitude is "envy"; not wanting others to be valued more: anger toward others, rejoicing in their plight.
 - The destructive power of envy is the vice of "the good", "the zealous". The conversion of the righteous is often more difficult than that of the sinner.
 - Scribes and Pharisees, who work hard to deserve the love of God, react badly toward Jesus: the good news for sinners becomes bad news for them.
 - Jesus says that God loves men not for their merits but because he is good; the love of God cannot be 'earned', but accepted.
 - In the same way, our love for others should not be shown to those who deserve it - if we wait until they deserve it they will probably never do - but must be freely given as we are freely loved.
- Our relationship with others depends on our relationship with God. If we think we have to earn God's love, then others will have to earn ours.
 - But if we perceive that God loves us unconditionally, perhaps we will no longer be difficult with others, even if it may be true (by our standard) that they do not deserve it.
 - Perhaps then hearing Jesus message "God is interested in what is lost", makes us think and react, because envy is also in us.
 - This is because, in the end, we are like the elder son: religious people feel they do the right things. The more we feel righteous and spiritual, the more subtle is this temptation; it's like a "spiritual pride", a "sensuality of the spirit".



Envy and the evil eye of the righteous (2)

- ✿ The elder son represents those who resent the goodness of God and prefer to limit his love.
- ✿ He represents those people who go to church, but feel they own the church, faith and God himself. They are sure that God does not think in a different way than them.
- ✿ Like the elder son, they are jealous, angry, easily offended, feel rancour generated by the subtle conviction to be always in the right.
- ✿ Those who are preoccupied with avoiding "sin" harbour a lot of prejudices and are quick to judge and condemn. So much zeal prevents them from looking at situations and events with the only eye with which we should look: that of charity.

- ✿ Christian churches have not yet understood how radical Jesus' message is.
- ✿ They continue to terrorise consciences with the "flames of hell", and do not direct believers to the liberating experience of the goodness and forgiveness of God.
- ✿ It is for this that churches, so easily, fall into 'moralising'.

- ✿ It is interesting to note how the elder son is often forgotten.
- ✿ In our images we represents the Father who embraces his repentant son, while the elder one is in the background, if not absent.
- ✦ The reason is that we probably prefer to identify ourselves with the "sinner", as if the elder son wasn't one, i.e. with the character that has the more pleasant role.
- ✿ Each of us has the same dilemma as the elder son: accept or reject that the love of the Father goes beyond each comparison and admit to not being better than our brothers.
- ✿ Each of us has the same dilemma of the younger son: to accept the love of God that wants to give us back the full dignity of the role of a son or continue to insist that we are servants

The heir and the inheritance

- This parable invites us to identify with the characters and compare ourselves with them.
- We may find we are more like one or the other son, or perhaps a bit of both.
- What is really important is that we do not remain like them, but that **we are called to become like the Father.**

(Lk 6 :36) Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate

- To become like him, we need to show the same compassion to others as he shows us.
- We are his children and heirs; each of us must take up his role as Father and offer the same compassion that he has offered us; we mustn't go after false inheritances that make us lose the true wealth of the constant presence of the Father.
- The community has no need of another younger or elder son, converted or not, but a father who wishes to show his love to all his children.

- To do this, we must abandon comparisons, rivalries, competitions.
- In his light we can see our neighbour as a brother, who is loved by God as much as we are loved, and foster feelings of gratitude, recognizing that what we are and we have, is given as a gift of love.
- There is always a choice between resentment and gratitude.
- Perhaps, if we let the maternal love of God permeate our inner selves, many of our psychological, or presumed such, problems would melt as snow in the sun.
- Otherwise brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, lovers, friends can become our rivals or even enemies.
- There is a danger of being continually plagued by jealousy, doubts and resentments; everything is suspect, there is no trust any more.
- All of this is often unnecessary; a waste of time and energy. We are at the threshold of a sort of "pathology of darkness".