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Homily at Mass 4th Sunday of Lent, Year C – 31 March 2019

At the age of 76 St Augustine could look back on a long life and reflect, “Man is an unfathomably profound mystery.” His early life certainly didn’t point to the man he eventually became. He caused his mother endless pain and hurt: it is said that his mother St Monica prayed more with tears than with words for her son. Even her marriage wasn’t a happy one. Young Augustine’s life was not all that different to the lifestyle of many young people today – multiple love affairs, a son born outside of marriage, a devotee of all sorts of sects and ideologies – we’d call him a wanderer, a man looking for distractions in life, a young man typical of his day and ours, a man not all that different to the younger son of today’s Gospel parable.

Our Lord’s story of the prodigal son, or as it is sometimes called ‘the forgiving father’, is an unusually long Sunday Gospel, but who of us missed any of the details as we listened to it being read today? A father with two sons – one older, one younger: one ostensibly loyal to his dad, the other proud, defiant headstrong. We can miss the point about who was the real inheritor of the family estate – the elder son was actually the rightful and lawful inheritor as the first born of the family. This is a first clue about the sort of father Jesus depicts in this story – how indulgent, magnanimous, we could say radical the father is: he had already promised both sons a share of the estate: in his demand for cash the younger boy was actually expressing a wish that his father was already dead so that he’d have his share of the inheritance now, today. How could a son – a son dearly loved by his father – think or even say such a thing?

The next key element of the story is our Lord’s detail that the boy made his way to a foreign country – a strange land, a land far away, a place where things are done differently, where the rules are different, relationships are different, where food and customs are different and strange, “not like home”. In this far away and foreign place people use you up and spit you out. They exploit you and take your – or your dad’s – money. You can’t even get a proper job – you’re left in the mud – hungry, naked, ashamed – with the pigs.

It’s there – in the pigsty – that the boy thinks of home – his own bed, familiar food, decent clothes, even his kindly old dad. But in his shame, how can he return, after all that he had said and done? His defiance, grabbing the cash from his father’s hands, perhaps a terrible memory of an ungrateful and rude farewell. But you and I now see the boy through a different pair of eyes: we see the father, waiting patiently, perhaps at the gate of their house where he has been day after day since his son stormed off. He sees his boy – his heart beats faster, tears began to stream down his cheeks, he forgets his dignity – and perhaps his age and we can see him running to meet and embrace his son – his boy, his beloved son whom he once thought lost perhaps dead – now home! Home!

You and I know that this is a story about the love and mercy of our indulgent God, the Father of Jesus Christ. At Mass next Sunday the Church will put before us the true story of the woman dragged before Jesus, and the haunting question: “who will cast the first stone?” Today we can place ourselves in the shoes of the young boy, and look at our own lives – even perhaps going back years – and see ourselves: me, this “unfathomably profound mystery”: so much loved by a merciful and faithful Heavenly Father, yet not without sin, always in need of grace, pardon, forgiveness. And in the Sacrament of Reconciliation we find this loving and indulgent Father as he reaches out to us through the ministry of priests.

This is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1465) says:

When he celebrates the sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial judge whose judgment is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God’s merciful love for the sinner.