

Last week, we were talking about new beginnings. Recalling words of Queen Elizabeth and President McAleese in Dublin Castle at the State dinner during the memorable visit by the Queen to this country in 2011, we thought of new beginnings in terms of an honesty about the past and a resolve to change in our approach to the future.

I concluded my thoughts with a prayer of confession that I would often use at Family Service and Family Communion:

Most merciful God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we confess that we have sinned
in thought, word and deed.
We have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
In your mercy
forgive what we have been,
help us to amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be;
that we may do justly,
love mercy,
and walk humbly with you, our God.
Amen.

The last part of that picks up on words of the Prophet Micah and he reflects on the changes that are going to have to happen in the mindset of the nation if it is to avoid the impending judgement.

Our Gospel reading, the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is a story of honesty, of seeing/not seeing ourselves as we really are. This parable is often seen as one of a pair with the Parable of the Prodigal Son; the younger son being seen as one with the tax collector; the older son seen as one with the Pharisee. The Pharisee in today's parable and the older son in the Parable of

the Prodigal Son stand as ones who are both confident in their own virtue, both expecting that virtue to be recognised. God I think you I am not like that tax collector; Dad you are lucky to have only one renegade son.

The key moment in this latter parable is when the younger son, having come a cropper after leaving home to find the good life, came to himself, came to his senses, saw himself as he really was and began the journey home. The welcome of the father is symbolic of a God who never abandons his children, who is always open to our return, as we celebrate in the words of the prayer of consecration in the Communion Service:

even when we turned away from you,
you never ceased to care for us,
but in your love and mercy you freed us from the slavery of sin,
giving your only begotten Son to become man
and suffer death on the cross to redeem us:

The tax collector in our parable has begun that journey home, on his knees in the Temple pouring out his regrets to God. He is the one who goes home justified, healing, new beginnings have begun.