

This Sunday, the Fourth Sunday in Lent is traditionally observed as Mothering Sunday. It is a day on which, in the early Church, Christians used to return to the Church in which they had been baptised, their mother Church. It is a day on which we remember our mothers, those who brought us to birth, who nurtured us, who stayed with us through thick and thin, listened to our hopes and fears, our ingratitude, our tantrums – and through it all continued to love us.

I would normally have chosen lessons appointed for Mothering Sunday over and above those appointed for this Fourth Sunday in Lent. I'm not doing that this year. As I read through the Gospel appointed for today, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, in the light of Mothering Sunday, I saw this as a Parable of family life – not the sugary ideal but life as it really is. It is all there. There is sibling rivalry, there is the self-centred impulsiveness of the younger son, the self righteous resentment of the older brother – and running through the whole story the love of the parent in the face of hurts and misunderstandings.

I want to reflect on family life through the lens of this particular parable. As I began to think along these lines I thought of one particular family in Ahoghill. This was a lovely family, very much at the heart of the life of the Parish. There were two sons, both of whom got caught up in the heroine addiction that hit Ballymena during our time there. Like many addicts, they brought heartache to that household. They lied, they stole from the house, got involved in petty crime but they were still their sons, still their children. Eventually the mother did what she knew she had to do and reported her eldest son to the police. I recall sitting in the front room of the house as she told me of the day the police called for her son, the look of hurt, of anger, of fear on his face as he was lead out to the car, the tears she shed as he was driven away. As we talked, I said, 'Can you imagine anything your son might ever do that would mean you no longer loved him?' She thought for a while before saying, 'No I can't.' In the

future, he would no doubt make her angry, he would no doubt hurt her, but, deep down, she would always love him. A love that goes against all logic, a love that continues to flow. There is a truth to that old adage, ‘We like because, we love although.’

Going back to the Parable, I thought of the father watching his youngest son head off. The young son so sure of himself, so sure that he knew better than the old man. The father hurt, worried, maybe only too aware of what was likely to happen. I often think one of the hardest things we do as parents is that of watching our children make their own mistakes. Maybe we made those same mistakes, or something like them ourselves and we know the hurt that can be coming down the line. And all we can do is watch. I recall a friend, who himself had been a bit of a tear-away in his own day, saying to my younger lad; ‘Benjamin, experience is a harsh taskmaster. But the fool will learn at the feet of none other.’ The young lad was not impressed! I now watch him starting to rear his own child and wonder what lies ahead for them both.

In the parable, life went pear-shaped and the young man found himself destitute, without friends, without hope. And we are told ‘he came to himself’; other translations put it, ‘he came to his senses’. A time of realisation, realisation of what has been lost, of mistakes that have been made. As Christians we use words like sin, repentance. What we are talking about is new beginnings. The young lad heads home, chastened, tail between his legs; what is going to face him?

What faces him is an old man, who had been watching out for him, running towards him, arms outstretched. Carefully rehearsed words of apology are brushed aside in words of welcome, of celebration as he rejoices

let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

The father loved the older son. He went out to talk to him and listened to his pain, his resentment. At this point the father expresses his love (all that I have is yours – your brother has had his share) and he tries to explain his joy and invites him to share in it. The story is left open-ended. I thought back to a time I had a major row with a brother. I spoke about it to my father. I suppose I expected him to take my side. He listened and then he said simply, ‘Kevin, I know you are hurting – but you are both my sons.’ I learned that day that I did not own my father’s love; it was a gift.

I thought again of that mother in Ahoghill as I asked her, ‘Can you imagine anything your son might ever do that would mean you no longer loved him?’; as she thought for a while before saying, ‘No I can’t.’

It is in the home, and particularly from our mothers, that we first experience love, an unconditional love. It is in and through this that we begin to grasp the love of God for us in Christ that Jesus points us to in this Parable of the Prodigal Son. And I begin to grasp what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Romans:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Rom 8:35,37-39