

Use the Gospel for self-examination

At the Eucharistic Liturgy this Sunday, we will hear a classic story on mercy and forgiveness from the Gospel of St. Luke. It is the story of the young man who claims his inheritance out of season. He squanders his patrimony on activities that bring pleasure to his body but which deaden his spirit. So bad are the circumstances in which he ultimately finds himself that he decides to swallow his pride, return home and beg his father to allow him to become a servant in his home.

What follows in the story most of us have known from childhood. The generosity of the loving father for his returning son goes far beyond anything for which the son could possibly have hoped. The father runs out to embrace him, and to wrap him in a fine robe. And the father orders that an elegant party be organized to celebrate his son's return.

But not all at home are quite so moved as the father is at the son's return. The young man's brother has considerable trouble finding peace in all of the excitement. He wonders why his brother's return merits a party. He who stayed



Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Along the Way

home, who did his work day by day, and who never squandered his father's money, rarely, if ever, is guest of honor at a party organized by his father. The father and returning son are one in the joy of reunion, restoration and new beginnings. The faithful son stands apart — confused, hurt, edging towards bitterness.

The story of the Prodigal has lived in our tradition for 2,000 years. You and I probably could not number the times we have heard it. Yet, it remains for most — I know it does for me — a very powerful story. I think that is because it tells us something immensely important about God. But I also think the sto-

ry easily moves our hearts because it teaches us a lot about ourselves.

I'd like to invite you to test out that assertion in the time between your reading these words and your presence at Mass this Sunday. Here is my suggestion:

Open your bible to the Gospel of St. Luke. You will find the story of the Prodigal in Chapter 15 at verses 1-3 and 11-32. Take a moment before you read the passage, asking the Lord to open your heart to the power of the story, and to any good gifts the passage might hold for you.

After you have done that, read the passage at a pace that is comfortable for you. If a particular image or word catches your attention, rest with it as long as it speaks to your heart. Move on when you feel that you have drawn what you can from the moment.

I would recommend to you that you stand in the shoes of each of the characters in the story. When you come to the father, remember your own father or someone who is a father figure for you. Think of times and ways — whether you are woman or man — when you have been the one from whom another

expected forgiveness and compassion.

And, when you come to the prodigal son, think of moments when you have yearned for forgiveness, as a drowning person is desperate for air. To whom did you turn and what was your experience?

Finally, the son who stayed home, worked faithfully and was stung by the fuss made over his brother who had wasted everything. Does his hurt in such circumstances hold resonance for you? Or does that character speak to you in any other way?

When you have spent some time in that kind of reflection on the reading, ask the Lord for the grace to fold into your own life any insight or inspiration you may have experienced in your time of prayer.

Then, I would invite you to pray for the person who will preach the homily at the Sunday liturgy. Ask God to inspire that individual for the good of those who will hear the homily. Pray, too, for yourself that what is alive in you from your reading and prayer will be nourished by the homilist.

I wish you a blessed Lent.
Peace to all.

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