The Prodigal Father
A Postmodern Homily

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prodigal, a. & n. Recklessly wasteful (person); lavish *of*.[. . . f. L *prodigus* wasteful]

It is tempting to think of Jesus's parables as timeless, unvaryingly true for every age. A temptation I find myself resisting in one recently heard gospel reading, to wit the Parable of the Prodigal Son. A process of what one might call 'post-modern contextual reframing' has been going on in my mind, with the result that it is still a powerful parable, and it is still about prodigality. But it is not about a son.

Accepting the context from Jesus's own telling, it is a story with a point about his own father, a father who loves unconditionally. Hence Christians have constructed this man as a model for God. But our hard-to-resist emotional identification with the elder brother prompts a tiny reservation. Were the love as it should have been, we would not have this sense that he is right to feel aggrieved. Somehow there is a gap between words and deeds.

The crucial deed is a non-deed, an omission: the father neglects to include his unprodigal son in the welcome. He had plenty of opportunity: he could have sent another servant to let him know at the same time as the servant was sent to kill the fatted calf. Staging a rave with appropriate dressing up, eating, drinking and cavorting takes time; if the brother were to participate he needed to know it was on. But no, at the end of the day he returns from his labours for his father and comes upon a disconfirming conundrum: his own home ablaze with celebration and him completely in the dark. No wonder he goes into a sulk.

An understandable oversight on the father's part, you say? Yes, of course, one always forgets something when concocting an impromptu party. But look at what this guiding star of forgiving love has forgotten – to cover for the most emotionally charged relationship in the Bible, the foundation-story of hate, fraud and violence among men: Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers . . . This oversight suggests that this paterfamilias is a tad egocentric, even verging on the narcissistic. He has sons, and he relates to them in an exemplary way. But he is blind to the fact that to be a father of two children is to be a parent of two siblings. He has created a family, but he can't manage it.

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His behaviour prompts a further reservation. It drives me to suggest that he is immature, that he has failed to accommodate himself to the transition in the family system consequent upon his children's coming of age. The failure of the father to relinquish the emotional rewards of the father role keeps the son trapped as child. In Eric Berne's 'Transactional Analysis' terms, they are not communicating as adults: the line of communication is angled, not on the level (Berne 1964: 28–32). The emotion may be felt as love, but it is not morally effective as love. It is, to suspicious postmoderns, an abusive relationship. The evidence of abuse in the parable is that the elder brother acts like an overlooked adolescent, yet we know he is a grown man. Space has not been made for this grown man among his significant others, notably vis-à-vis his father; he is held back, held down. His rage at the party is the rage of a person who has been both overlooked and overtaken – the father has overlooked and the brother overtakes.

And so, self-esteem through the floor, the elder brother regresses. As pious parable-hearers we dutifully disapprove of his emotional outburst. But this is to be pushed off the story by the moral. What the story shows is that those who relate to us may need also to relate to each other. Sure, we privilege our I-Thou relationships. But there are also third-party relationships. We can contribute to those Other-Other relationships, or we can neglect them. Here they are neglected, and the storyteller shows the consequence when he has the elder brother redraw the family genogram for the father with the brilliantly distancing 'This son of yours'.

The storyteller shows the consequence – but omits to draw the moral *for the father*. The moral that *was* drawn is the moral for the son, and thus (as heirs of the people in the parables) for us: he has, and we have, a generous and forgiving father/Father on whom we can always depend. This moral has been hugely influential in Christian history. But I think our age is requiring us to move on. We need to push our way back into the story and leave this old moral behind. For it may be said to have constructed (with other influences from Mediterranean culture of that time) a structural fault in Christianity: a parent-centred relational universe, a moral system which privileged vertical relationships over horizontal ones. It is a 'fault' because when the vertical becomes the plane of salvation, the horizontal becomes incidental. The sacralisation of fatherhood in Christianity has undermined the holiness of alternative ways of relating, and has diminished the importance of non-hierarchical links.

I see this privileging of the vertical as impoverishing contemporary human experience in two ways, one an effect, and the other an effect of the effect. The primary effect, the diminution, even distortion of the human horizontal, manifests in 'pathological' forms of what should be relations of the highest human value: priests infantilising

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their congregations, teachers ignoring the developmental needs of their children, health professionals objectifying their patients, workers instrumentalised by their employers as so many machines, electors manipulated into sanctioning the grandiose apotheoses (*Shock and Awe*) of politicians wishing to lord it over others. Thus both in Christian institutions – parishes and congregations, family, education, religious orders and communities – and in the secular institutions of states and societies emergent from Christian civilisation, the privileging of the hierarchical as the axis of effectiveness, of 'redemption', has marginalised the autonomous responsible self. When the *parent* takes priority, the *adult* is eclipsed. The vertical may be the dimension of obedience, trust and dependence between parent and child. But the horizontal is the dimension of leadership, love and work among adults: marriage and friendship, aspiration and achievement, art and play, equity and justice, dialogue and peace.

It is because we struggle with so many and such painful challenges in achieving adult ways of handling ourselves in our world that we should acknowledge that it is the *father* who is prodigal. *He* is the recklessly wasteful person – indeed lavish in his self-giving love, but still yet wasteful of the human treasure he holds in trust. The wastefulness derives from his failure to accept his sons as independently relational beings. He longs for them to turn to him with their needs; but their need to be enabled to love each other as brothers, to transcend their rivalry as siblings, escapes his notice. He is blind to the emotional system he lives in and to how it constructs its members. He is blind to how his own self-idealisation closes off his capacity to respond to others in ways that respect who they might be independently of him.

> 'He relates to them as if they were what his thought governs. He acts with them according to old form and meaning . . . In this way the making of meaning in [his] mind is not something that grows from any active engagement in the world. It is a meaning that is brought from the past or is carried around as the way to be and [he], living from the isolation of his vision of life, imposes the meaning on the world.' (Shainberg 1989: 166)

This 'isolation of vision of life' means his love will not be productive, generative. It will fail to be articulated into the future and into the wider community through his descendants. For his sons should have learned from him how to balance each individual's needs with those of the social wholes which they are part of and co-create. From him they should have acquired faith in the possibility of rising above the inertia imposed on old relationships by self-idealisation and the search for security (Shainberg 1989: 167).

The second impoverishment of human experience from the privileging of the vertical in Christian culture is a certain retreatism with regard to the plasticity of the contemporary self. Since institutional

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Christianity is so inclined to the vertical axis, it is failing to engage with postmodern culture, a horizontal culture of self-authorship, co-creation and mutuality in relationships, where truth is perspectival, authority contingent, personhood fragile. Managing the flow between moments is, for increasing numbers, the maximum response to the challenge set by this culture, not building lasting structures. This world, corrosive but not necessarily corrupt, has no respect for parental Christianity. It deconstructively draws Christians' children to take journeys into alien cultures, where often they waste their substance, sometimes their lives, seeking the flowing self which they could not find in their parents' house. Thus the spiritual estrangement of their children and the consequent emptying of their churches is the paradoxical return to the prodigality of self-indulgent Christians.

So we – faithful to the scripts and scrolls of outer and inner parents – we have wasted our opportunities to hear and make heard a gospel which can speak to the yearning spirits coming of age around us. Neglecting the signs of the times (burgeoning non-religious spirituality, e.g.), living on cultural legacies of questionable relevance to our situation, we have allowed Christianity to become self-referring, and so to be distanced from a famished world crying out for compassion. This distancing of Christianity from the larger population has resulted in the distancing of the larger population from Christianity. The secularisation of today is a Christian achievement – unwilled perhaps, but a consequence of wilfulness. Christians impoverish their age by failing to be fully present to it.

God, however, is present to every age. If so, scripture must be reclaimable by all, even by the men and women of this age of suspicion. It can have no less rich resources to offer us than have been received by earlier generations. This parable reclaims me by prompting me to raise my voice in respectful yet insistent challenge of our Christian legacy of adult-averse institutions, world-refusing spirituality, and deafness to youth. I would wish to challenge the waste of human beings whose mutual giving and receiving in love is diminished by the continuing dominance of the vertical axis over the horizontal, of fatherhood over brotherhood, of institutional preaching over humane teaching, of dependence over partnership, of feeling comfortable with oneself over anticipating the needs of others.

We hear a new truth in a familiar gospel in the way truth can best be heard, as making sense of the lives of its hearers. There are other lives than mine where new readings of this parable would be opportune. Girls and young women are siblings too, and experience prodigal parents in their own ways. Migrants, prisoners, pensioners, ethnic minority members – all find themselves pressed, by their lack of social power, into roles which are marked by a form of junior status: de facto children. Perhaps readings which make sense of their

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lives will appear when the last vestiges of Roman *patria potestas* fade from the Fathers who regularly have to preach to this text. But, for me and for now, as I become aware of the lessons for a post-paternal age of recognising the prodigal father's success and failure as a parent, I marvel at the resourcefulness of scripture.

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