

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Exodus 32:7-11. 13-14 / Luke 15:1-32)
15.09.2019

Dear brothers and sisters,

We all have in mind Jesus' words: When you want to pray to God, say: "Our Father who art in heaven..." Our Father! Yes, the God in whom we believe, the God revealed to us in Jesus is our father. "Father": What an inspiring word to use when we address God or speak of him! It is a word which evokes so many loving memories; it is a word which nourishes our prayerful thoughts; it is a word we like to repeat unceasingly following the rhythm of our breathing: Abba-Father.

Nevertheless, for many of us, the word 'father' is not as idyllic as might be imagined at first sight. The reason is obvious. The natural way to enter into a relationship with God as father is our own experience with our human father. We are inclined to think that God our father relates to us just as our human father used to relate to us. Even if most of our fathers had the desire to do the best for us, the truth is that none of them got everything right in this respect. Our relationships with our fathers were often complex, both good and bad, and this will have coloured and still will influence our relationship with God our Father. When we call God our Father, we may well think of the imperfect experiences we had with our human fathers. When this is so it happens that we are in relationship with a partly false image of God. We can form a distorted image of God.

For some of us, it is even impossible to address God as Father, because our experience with our human father was just so painful...

One of the purposes of the sacred Scriptures is to help us to discover and appreciate the true face of God. One of the most helpful pages of the gospel in this regard is chapter 15 of St Luke's gospel – the passage we have just heard and which is proposed for our meditation this morning. What we have here is an illustration of the true fatherhood of God which is always a reality much more beautiful than any human experience of paternity we may have had. God is revealed to us in this text as a merciful Father.

What does today's gospel passage teach us about the paternity of God?

It shows us that God is a Father who respects the freedom of his children. The merciful father in the parable consents to divide his property between his two sons even when the younger son asks for his share in advance, well before the normal time it should have been given to him, after the death of his father. The youngest son's request must have been hurtful, painful for the father. The son's demand was a kind of putting to death of the father, and yet the father accepted it. The Father knew that his son's request was not entirely right, but he consented to it out of respect for his son. The father respected the son who did not respect him. What humility! Our heavenly Father respects our freedom, our infidelities to his covenant of love with us. The Father does not impose himself upon

us. He proposes himself to us. He educates us. It is up to us to discover through our own experience the way that leads to death and the way that leads to life.

God's way of being a father should inspire our own human way of being fathers. It should lead us to respect our children, their rights and their freedom. This is a duty for us. We, who are children of God our Father, must respect and love others. We cannot but think of parents who are disconcerted by the choices made by their children. The first step for such parents is to respect the freedom of their children and pray for them. And this is also true for our relationship with every other human being. We all have to respect other people's freedom, their legitimate differences, and not try to force them to become like us, to think as we do, to be as we are, to enter into our perspectives which are often short-sighted.

The father of the younger son is shown to have continued to hope that his son would come back to him. The father waited for the return of his son. He kept vigil, even scanning the horizon. "The younger son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity". The father's hope was not deceived; his hope was rewarded. The father, far from being angry, moody, disappointed, spiteful as a result of the misbehaviour of his child, kept his heart loving and open to him. When his son came back, He forgave him, rejoiced and celebrated with him and for him. His son was lost; he is found.

This shows us that a father should always pray for his child and never lose hope in him. He should always keep his heart open and loving in regard to his child. He should always be merciful towards him. The love of a father for his child should know no limits. This is something easy to say but more difficult to put into practice. We need a heart like God's to succeed. This is something that we have to ask for in prayer.

With his elder son, the father also showed himself humble. The father came out of the home and the feast to plead with his elder son. The father gave him some landmarks as evidence of his love for him: "You are always with me and all I have is yours. It was only right we should celebrate and rejoice because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found". The father did not become a prisoner of his angry son. He was not intimidated by him. He sought to teach his son to situate himself properly, without jealousy, anger or judgment. His was a paternity that set out to help his child grow and mature.

A father should give landmarks to his child to help him to walk on the path of life. His mission is not to please his son always by entering into his child's vision when it is false or distorted. This is never helpful for growth.

May the meditation of today's gospel passage help us to purify our image of God as father!