

In the gospel reading we had the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is a well known parable and many people associate themselves with one of the brothers. If you're the irresponsible type you associate with the prodigal. If you're the responsible type you associate with the faithful brother who stayed true to his father throughout, then you feel a bit bitter about the lavish reception the prodigal receives when he returns home. But actually all the characters in the parable act shamefully, and for today I want to look at the shameful conduct of the father - who we often understand as the God figure in the parable.

If you remember last week's gospel reading Jesus gave some tough teachings. People asked him why bad things happened to people. Their assumption was that they must have done something wrong and the bad things were God's justice coming to them. It makes for a tidy way to understand the world. Good things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. And if a person appears to be good but is secretly a sinner, they get what's coming to them.

Jesus replies that this sort of thing is not necessarily true. Bad things do happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. A person's life here on earth does not reflect what God thinks of that person. The whole teaching is unnerving. We want to be able to control the chaos and danger of the world through being wise and careful and good. Quite often that works, but it is no guarantee. We are left with uncertainty and the challenge of trusting God even through bad things.

If we look at the father in the parable we learn some other things about God that can also challenge our assumptions. I think most of us envision God to be dignified, upright, and solemn. This parable suggests otherwise.

Right from the beginning the father acts foolishly. When the younger son comes to him and says 'give me my inheritance early' he should be offended. His son is basically saying, "Dad, you're dead to me. I don't want to be bothered with you. Give me what I should inherit so I can get on with my own life in my own way." The father should upbraid his son for such brash thoughts. He should write him out of the will. But

instead he gives him what he wants. The son takes it, moves far away, and squanders it. Only when it's too late does he recognize his mistakes. He decides to go home in shame and beg for a job.

But his inner thoughts also reveal something foolish about his father. You'll remember he thinks, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare..." These hired hands would have been day laborers. Day laborers were a dime a dozen. You don't waste food and money on these people. It would be as if McDonalds started paying \$35 an hour for flipping hamburgers. That would be utter foolishness, but that is basically the way the father operates.

But then the father's foolishness turns to shameful conduct. This father is a wealthy and powerful landholder. He has status and he should live with dignity. Think of the queen of England as an example. When was the last time you saw a video of her on You Tube doing the chicken dance?

Wealthy people walk. They walk erect and proud. They do not look harried or out of sorts. I think of the advice the

queen of Genovia played by Julie Andrews gives to the new and awkward princess, played by Anne Hathaway, in the Princess Diaries. She says that royalty never hurry. They "hasten". Also, the queen is never late. No, the queen always arrives on time because the queens arrival is the standard for time. Everyone else is either early or late.

But this father doesn't seem to have gotten the memo on dignity. No, instead when he sees his lost and shameful son afar off he jumps up and runs like a nut to his son where he hugs him and kisses him in greeting.

And of course there is more to it than just not having dignity by running. There are certain practical issues involved as well. Pants weren't invented yet. Men wore robes, and a robe is a lot like a dress. Now, I'm not in the habit of wearing dresses, I let that up to women, so I'm not 100% positive about this, but it's nearly impossible to run a sprint while wearing a dress; especially a tight one. You have two options. One, leave the dress down and try to run, except you'll likely fall flat on your face. Or two, hike the dress up way over your knees to free up your legs.

Of course the problem with this technique is that the Fruit of the Loom company hasn't come into existence yet and so men don't have "tidy whities" to wear. In other words, you're literally looking at a very serious wardrobe malfunction. Just picture in your mind an old man wearing a dress hiked up to his waist running down the street.

And this is the parable's depiction of God. Oh dear.

You may have struggled with the ideas about God that come from last week's gospel reading; the idea that God doesn't necessarily protect good people from bad things happening. But our minds can usually invent a reason for that. We can say that in God's omniscience all things are still ultimately safe in God's hands. We can say that God knows best and we will trust in that, even if it doesn't make any sense. We may not like it, but it's "okay."

Our God who knows no shame is a different story. It's worse than imagining the queen of England dancing the chicken

dance. What does it mean that God really could care less about our rules of propriety? What does it mean that God's joy at being reconciled to a lowlife-failure-of-a-sinner is more important than dignity? Sometimes I think people are more offended by a shameful God than a mean one.

Teenagers are notorious for being offended by their parents. Parents just simply do embarrassing things in front of their teenagers friends. How many times have words like these been uttered: "Mom, dad, just go away and stop talking." "I'm so embarrassed to be around you." "You ruin my life!"

What's it like to have a God who embarrasses you? The sinners of the time were relieved and overjoyed. The pious people were not. And they succeeded in killing the messenger for the message he delivered. "God cannot be shameful!" they thought.

But God is God. May you not be too proud to accept a God who does embarrassing things. And may you too rejoice as God rejoices whenever someone accepts his love. Amen