

## **Sacred Heart Novena** *Gardiner Street (5)*

An open heart

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### **Introduction**

Many of us know what it is to be on our own in a foreign land. Last night, I mentioned my time in the desert south of Jerusalem, the Negev. That was a study period in the Holy Land and I went there knowing absolutely nobody. Nothing like the prodigal son, of course, but interesting nonetheless. It is the kind of experience that makes you look at yourself again. Such dislocation is not at all a bad place to be. In one way, C-19 has landed us all in a foreign land. We could all ask ourselves, what have we learned – especially about ourselves?

### **Topic**

For all its risky familiarity, today's Gospel can still shed light our own experience and journey in three ways.

### **Arguments**

- 1.** Firstly, there's a wonderful line the parable: "he came to himself and said." Our translation has "he came his senses" and now doubt he did. But more importantly, the Greek says he came to himself – a phrase much loved by St Augustine who came to God through a shattering encounter with himself. And then Luke give us an internal monologue, "He said to himself...". Luke likes to let us into the inner world of his characters. For instance, in the parable of Pharisee and the tax-collector, we are told the Pharisee prayed "to himself"!! Or in the story of the unjust judge, he says, "if I don't give in to her, she'll give he a black eye"!! Luke is inviting us not to be afraid to see ourselves as we truly are, not to be afraid of the inner world.
- 2.** Secondly, we all know in families there can be tensions, disagreements and rivalries between siblings. In our cooler moments, we recognise that we are more like each other than anything else! Something similar may be said here. On a surface level, the two sons are very different: one dutiful and hard-working, the other a waster and eventually a down-and-out. When you look closely, however, they are really almost twins. After the younger son messes up royally, he plans his somewhat unlikely future: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one your our hired workers." He wants to come home as a slave and he wants to relate to the father on the basis of abject guilt. In a way, the other son already is a slave – it is interesting that on coming in from the fields, he speaks first to a slave. In his world, he relates to the father on the basis of servile loyalty. So, the brothers are more like each other than they might seem...
- 3.** Thirdly, even in the one family there can be different qualities of relationships with the parents. We know that each parent is more than the projected reality. The same is true in the parable: the younger son would like to be a slave, on the basis of abject guilt. The

older son is a salve on the basis of service loyalty. Neither is a good foundation for a happy family life and, accordingly, the father firmly rejects both projections. He is breathtakingly, shockingly, compassionate and loving to *both*. For the younger son, he throws a party; for the older brother, the door is always open. In our hallowed Catholic tradition, both ways of relating to God are painfully familiar: abject guilt and servile loyalty. God, so to speak, will have none of it. God, our compassionate father, rejects both projected ways of relating. The God of this parable, in the language of James Joyce, is a womanly man, just like Leopold Bloom. He takes us by surprise.

### **Conclusion**

The parable, therefore, invites us to openness in three different ways, all essential for the spiritual journey. Firstly, an **openness** to self-knowledge, however shattering or disturbing. It is the royal road of spirituality. In the words of Augustine, let me know myself that I may know you. Secondly, an **openness** to others, recognising our affinities, the deep similarities, in spite of all the surface differences. Today, this will of necessity take us into questions of race, religion, class, orientation, language and culture. As we heard in the Act, God has no favourites; instead the person who does what is right is welcome before him. Thirdly, an **openness** to God as always greater than our projections and images. As we saw the evening on the prayerful heart, consistent prayer means handing over to God in all God's mystery – we are not the ones leading this relationship. "We could say more, but could never say enough. Let the final word be, He is the All."

After a quarter of a year in lockdown, it is no harm to reflect back and take stock. We've been in a foreign land. Perhaps, in the words of the parable, I have come to myself and got to know myself incrementally better. Perhaps for all our differences, I have become more aware of the affinities and similarities with those with whom I share my life. Perhaps, above all, I have stood before the sheer otherness God, even in his welcome and unfathomable compassion towards us all.

From a completely different tradition and in more practical vein, Rumi speaks of an open heart:

In compassion and grace, be like the sun...  
In concealing other's faults, be like the night...  
In generosity and helping others, be like a river...  
In anger and fury, be like the dead...  
In modesty and humility, be like the soil...  
In tolerance, be like the ocean...  
Either appear as you are, or be as you appear...