

Donnybrook

27 March 2022

Welcome

Recently, in a group discussion, a participant expressed dissatisfaction with hearing the same old stories year after year. The example given was the prodigal son.

Topic

The remark set me thinking and my thoughts went in three directions.

Steps

Firstly, the story we have just heard has many dimensions with a kind of ricochet effect. A short list would include

Relationships: Fathers, sons, brothers, foreigners, servants, and, in an unsettling way, women. *Feelings:* desire, autonomy, rivalry, dependence, shame, jealousy, resentment. *Issues:* property, inheritance, rights and duties, authority, family. It is a lot to pack into a short story and gives us plenty to think about. Tolstoy was a great admirer and you can see why.

Secondly, at the centre of the story is the healthy loss of a false self. In the case of the prodigal son, he has one big false self to shake off: the selfish, self-focused, even greedy child, who thinks it is all about him. It takes profound alienation from family, faith and fatherland for him to come to himself. Only when that big mask has been shattered can he begin to see who he really is. At that point in the story, our translation is weak ("he came to his senses"). Much better: he came to himself, that is, finally he saw himself as he really is.

There is one other false self to be shaken off. In this, the two brothers, so different on the surface, are more alike than we imagine. Sibling rivalry comes with sibling resemblance. The younger son permits himself to think that he can come back as a household servant, in effect, a slave. The older one has boxed himself in as a kind of over-dutiful son/slave. The first projects his future relationship with the father on the basis of guilt; the second on the basis servile loyalty. Both projections would prevent any parent from being a true parent. As any natural parent would, the father briskly sets aside both projections, interrupting one speech and correcting the other. This is to be a loving relationship, including compassion and forgiveness.

Conclusion

Of course, today's Gospel cannot be reduced to a single message but perhaps this might help. All of us many selves: the way we think we come across to others; how others perceive us; the different relationships and, not least, the story we tell ourselves about who we are. There is even the "self" we present to God. All of these are partial and involve levels of self-delusion.

One person who had no such illusions was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a prisoner of the Nazis, he reflected on his tormented inner state. I'll read just a few lines and then the last couplet:

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cells confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a Squire from his country house.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage...

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

Only God knows who we really are and only in him to we find our true selves. As Augustine famously said, you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.