

## A Beautiful Picture of Justification

The father's loving welcome to his wayward, younger son (Lk 15:20-24) is a beautiful, concrete picture of God's justification of the sinner by grace, through faith, for Christ's sake. The father recognised his son while he was still far away. That suggests he had been living in hope that he would return, and was watching for him with yearning. He didn't wait until he arrived. We can imagine the prodigal clothed in rags, like a beggar. Pity filled the father's heart. He ran to him. There wasn't one word of rebuke. He threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The son began to recite what he had determined to say, but the father didn't even allow him to finish his little prepared speech.

There were no penalties, no humiliation, no period of probation, only honours. In Eastern villages there were plenty of people who knew everyone else's affairs. We can imagine the people of the village saying, "Tut, tut!" about the doting man watching for his foolish son, who had made him sell up a large portion of the family estate at short notice, to come back. In the East people don't consider it dignified for a respectable adult to run, even if he is caught in the rain. Yet the father ran. He didn't care what people thought of him.

Everything the father said indicated his joyful, full acceptance of his son. The father told his slaves, "*Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one, and put it on him!*" A robe was a long garment that people wore at formal affairs. His son was going to look distinguished. The robe reminds us of the robe of righteousness that the King provides for His guest at His feast (Mt 22:11-12). In the parable the father's forgiving love stands for God's mercy. God rejoices when He receives a sinner and forgives him. In the parable Jesus doesn't mention the means of redemption: the Father's basis for His justification of the sinful world. We know from elsewhere that it is the ransom in Jesus' sacrificial blood, which expressed the Father's love and grace. Jesus' righteousness is the glorious robe of the sinner whom God justifies through faith.

He continues, "*Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.*" The ring was going to mark him as a person of importance, the honoured guest. Though he had turned his share of the property into cash and spent it all, the ring was something like the authority to sign cheques. The father's words imply that his son had arrived barefoot. In those days servants went barefoot. Members of the household wore shoes. Even if he had the chance to say, "Make me one of your paid workers", the father would have taken no notice. The father was going to treat him as his true son, and the rest of the household would, too.

The father went on, "*Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and begin to enjoy ourselves!*" This joy is the link with the other two parables in Luke 15, the lost sheep and the lost coin. When what was lost is found, there has to be a celebration to share the joy. An Eastern family sometimes kept a fattened calf to use for a special festivity.

The father meant, "My son has been as good as dead to me. He had gone from my life, but now he has returned. I had lost him, but now I have found him again. I have him with me again." The words "*For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again. He was lost and has been found*" apply to the sinner whom God justifies. God, in His joy, declares that the person who had been alienated from Him has now been brought back to Him. The one who had been spiritually dead is alive again, and will live for ever in the bliss of heaven. To the elder brother the father insisted: "*We had to celebrate and be glad. This brother of yours was dead and has come to life. He was lost and has been found.*"

The elder brother's attitude stands for the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes, who opposed Jesus. The elder brother refused to call the prodigal his brother, only "this son of yours." He apparently thought his father's dishonourable younger son should be punished for his wrongdoing and sent away again. He was the only one who had a right to be on the estate that his father had owned. He was like Jonah, who did not want the people of Nineveh to be spared. He was like the self-centred, exclusive Pharisees, who complained that Jesus welcomed disreputable people and ate with them.