

**Reflection on the Gospel-4th Sunday of Lent Year C
(Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Unfailing forgiveness and arms open to welcome back wayward sons and daughters is a key motif in today's gospel story. There is no room in the hearts of Jesus' critics for such forgiveness: upright law-abiding people should exclude "sinners" from their company. In a first-century Jewish context, it was easy enough to be a sinner. Whole groups of people, depending on their occupation, fell into that category simply because they failed to observe one or more of the 618 prescriptions of the law. Jesus' response to critics is the story of a parent whose adult children lose their way. One son finds his way back to the centre of family life and the support of the wider community while the other more law-abiding son seems to place himself outside the family circle, holding on to the resentment he feels at his sibling's return.

We need to attend to the gaps in the story: there may be daughters as well as sons in the family; there is surely another parent, a mother who shares the heartache of her husband when their younger son requests his share of the estate. To make such a request in this context is tantamount to wishing his parents dead. The older brother is not disadvantaged: he is assured of a two-thirds share according to the law as well as the ongoing love and support of his family, as his father makes clear.

The contrast between the young man's acquisitive nature and his parents' capacity to relinquish substantial property in the interests of relationship is striking. No motive is offered for the son's readiness to break all his ties and get as far away as he can. In the distant country, he squanders both his inheritance and his identity. A "severe famine" becomes the catalyst for his change of direction. Famine in any age means devastation of the earth that can lead to displacement, to broken relationships and even to global conflicts. In turning back, the young man shows no real interest in a restored relationship with his family or ancestral lands. Rather, he devises a plan that will put food in his belly. He composes a speech about having sinned against his father and against God and about being prepared to share the status of the servants. Thanks to the expansive heart of an extraordinarily compassionate parent, he does not have to deliver the speech he has prepared. Famine becomes feast. So it is with our merciful God. We abandon, even betray. We waste the bounty of Earth. Our motives for returning to the sources of love and community are very mixed, and yet our merciful God is ever ready, with our cooperation, to turn famine into feast. For that to happen in our times, we must turn away from our acquisitive, wasteful ways and respond as one to the pain of our planetary home.