Gospel and Faith in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15)

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Introduction

The topic of this study, gospel and faith in the parable of the prodigal son, is surprising even to me. It came as inspiration during prayer that was unconnected with the theme of our convention. I kept pushing it away, but it would not leave me, finally I decided to pay attention. What I share here is more what I heard from listening to the parable in context of our convention theme than a "scientific" paper on the parable. Accordingly, my approach focuses on the text, on the different elements in the parable and their interrelationship so as to discern its overall message. Since the conference theme, what the Bible says about faith and evangelisation is our overall interpretative context, the study adopts an inter-textual approach that respects "the unity of Scripture".[1] Faith and evangelisation are about an alive and active response to the gospel. Such a response knows no authorial barriers or boundaries. Such boundaries may even be an obstacle to a faith-filled appropriation of the gospel, caused by moving Scripture from the authority of the church into the academia.[2] The study explores the key words in the topic, and then the text itself. Finally it considers the message of the parable for today.

Dimensions of Gospel and Faith in the Topic

Gospel (*euanggelion*) is essentially God's good news of salvation for humanity given free of charge in the incarnation, life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The heart or essence of this gospel is that God, moved by pity and compassion, goes in search of sinful humanity to work out human salvation. Biblical history records that after the sin of our first parents, God went in search of them to make them aware of the consequences of their action (Gen 3:16-19). Before that, God promised to undo through the woman and her seed the damage the devil had done (3:15). God's promise of permanent enmity or separation between the woman (her seed) and Satan is the first good news (*protoevangelium*) in the Bible, the foundation and rationale of all other biblical good news. The Bible itself is the faith-based, interpreted record of how God worked out this promise of searching for sinful humanity to free them from the bondage of sin through the history of Israel till the promise reached its fulfilment in the Incarnation. In this mystery, God's Word "became flesh," substantially and consubstantially one with humanity (John 1:1-2, 14). By his incarnation, Jesus united humanity inseparably to Divinity. In him God effected permanently and irreversibly the promised separation between humanity and Satan. In him God became "like us in all things except sin" (Heb 4:13); sin being what separates humans from God and makes all fall "short of God's glory" (Rom 3:23).

Jesus himself, therefore, is the gospel of God in search of the sinner (Rom 1:2-3, 16); "the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Rom 1:16). At his birth, the angel announced to the shepherds "news of great joy", the "birth of a Saviour" for all the people (Luke 2:11). The very name, "Jesus" (Hebrew *Yeshua*), given before his birth, signifies that "he will save his

[1] On the hermeneutic that "*respects the unity of the whole of Scripture*", see Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini: The Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the* Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), no 34, italics original; and previous conciliar and papal pronouncements cited there.

[2] Michael C. Legaspi's book, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) is an eye opener on this issue; reviewed by Teresa Okure, *RBL* 02/2012, www.bookreviews.org.

people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). John the Baptist describes him summarily as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Jesus proclaimed this gospel of God, searching for sinners in many ways. Among his core disciples were a Zealot (guerrilla warrior), tax collector (Levi/Matthew), vengeance oriented youths (James and John), and a "guileless" person, Nathanael, who saw nothing good in Nazareth. Peter, the rock on which he chose to build his church (*ekklesia*, God's end-time gathering of humanity; Matt 16:16-18), denied him thrice; Jesus prayed for him to use his experience, of having gravely sinned yet been totally forgiven, "to strengthen his brethren" (Luke 22:31-32). To the Pharisees, the righteous or law abiding ones, who criticised him for mixing and eating with tax collectors and sinners like Levi, he replied, "It is not the healthy who need the doctor but the sick", invited them "to go and learn the meaning" of God's words: "'I desire mercy not sacrifice'"; adding that he himself "came to call, not the upright but sinners" (Matt 9:10-13). Tax collectors and sinners constantly sought his company to hear his teaching. The Pharisees' criticism of his welcoming and eating with them triggered off Jesus' memorable parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-30), with the parables of the lost sheep (vv. 4-7) and the lost coin (vv. 8-10) as prelude, which is the subject of this study.

Post resurrection preachers of the good news reiterate the truth that Jesus came to save sinners. The core of Paul's gospel, born of his personal experience of God's grace, is that God forgives sinners free of charge, with no conditions attached.[3] Since "all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory" (Rom 3:23), all stand in need of being made righteous by God as a free gift though faith. Abraham's righteousness was not because he kept a law but because he believed in the God who alone justifies sinners (Romans 4). Paul himself, once a zealous persecutor of the church, became "apostle of Jesus Christ" "by God's grace" (1 Cor 15:10). He and Peter, both forgiven sinners, are jointly celebrated on June 29th as the foundational pillars of the church.

Above brief survey illustrates the truth that God's search for sinners is the operative fundamental of the gospel and the defining character of its message. Pope Francis reiterated this truth from day one of his pontificate, in particular in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*:

> The salvation, which God offers us, is the work of his mercy. No human efforts, however good they may be, can enable us to merit so great a gift. God by his sheer grace, draws us to himself and makes us one with him. He sends his spirit into our hearts to make us his children, transforming us and enabling us to respond to his love by our lives.[4]

The call for a new evangelisation must, of necessity, lay to heart this essential character of God's gospel, which is Jesus, and which he proclaimed by his life and ministry. The need to emphasise the gospel of God searching for sinners is all the more imperative today, given the rising trend of a new gospel, one which projects God as saving and doing good only to those who settle him

[3] Of a total of 76 occurrences of "gospel" *euanggelion*) in the NT, 62 are in the Pauline letters. *Computer Concordance to the Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th edition; 2nd ed. (Institute for New Testament Textual Research and the Computer Center of Munster University, ed; Berlin New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1985), 722-724.
[4] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium The Joy of the Gospel* Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013) no. 112; henceforth *EG*. The Encyclical *Lumen Fidei* was a completion of the work started by Benedict XVII.

with money and other material things.[5] This study examines this gospel in the parable of the prodigal son, to be proclaimed to all today and received in faith.

The essence of **faith**, as indicated in my presentation of the convention theme, is belief in God for who and what God is rather than in what God can do. It is because God is God that he can be relied upon and trusted to fulfill all God's promises of salvation, embodied in Jesus. "All" God's "Yes" or fulfillment of these promises from Genesis (2 Cor 1:19-20) are found in him. Paul's emphasis on the connection between faith and God's gospel may be summed up in his interpretation of Abraham's response to God's call: "Abraham put his faith in God and this was reckoned to him as uprightness" (Rom 4:3, NJB).[6] In other words, "in God's eyes, faith and uprightness are so interdependent as to be inseparable".[7] How this faith comes into play in the parable of the prodigal son, when it is not mentioned at all, will emerge in the course of this study.

Focus on the Parable

This study listens to the parable in its literary and life contexts to discover the meaning which these contexts shed on its message. The study has three parts: 1. the literary and life contexts of the story at the level of Jesus (Luke 14:7:15:2); 2. the parable in its many but very economically told parts (Luke 15:3-32); and 3. the parable in its Lucan context. A parable is essentially a story or saying put alongside another to highlight meaning.[8] The parable of the prodigal son illustrates the nature of Jesus' mission and God's gospel and invites readers to put its meaning alongside the challenges of faith in their efforts to appropriate the gospel through the evangelising mission of the church.

1. The Parable in the Context of Jesus (Luke 14:25-15:2)

Luke 14 ends with Jesus telling "the large crowd that were traveling with him" (14:25), "Anyone who has ears to hear, let the person hear" (*ho eken ota akouein, akueto*; 14:35). He said this concerning his teaching on the cost of discipleship and the authenticity and integrity of the disciple as salt (14:25-35). In other words, whoever wants to be his true follower (not just following him in a crowd without personal commitment) must be ready to prefer him to all other values: parents, siblings, married partner and even "one's own life". Otherwise, the person "cannot be my disciple". This choice entails a readiness to envisage, and determination to endure to the end, the trials one is sure to meet in the life of discipleship (14:28-33). As salt is useless if it loses its flavour, an uncommitted disciple is useless to Jesus' mission (14:34-35).

It is against this background, that "all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near [or crowding around, NJB] to hear what he had to say" (15:1). They would have heard this teaching on the requirements and cost of discipleship. The tense of both the crowds following Jesus and of tax collectors flocking to hear him is the imperfect of repetitive or habitual action. The scene introduces a characteristic of Jesus' mission. Sinners are among those who had ears capable of hearing (14:35) and so kept seeking Jesus' company to hear what he had to say. His message

[5] See, *Divine Blessings and Material Wealth in the Bible*, Acts of CABAN, vol. 5 (Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2014).

[6] All of Romans 4 is Paul's interpretation of Abraham's faith in God, not the Law, as what justified him. In Romans 5 he expatiates on the truth that faith alone guarantees the reception of God's salvation by both Jew and Gentile.

[7] NJB, note d on this verse, sees this interpretation as being "completely consistent with Paul's teaching".

[8] The Greek word *parabolē*, is from the verb *parabalein*, to throw alongside, compare, put side by side, to help disclose meaning. It could be a story, a saying or a proverb.

gave them hope and dignity in a community that treated them as sinners, the moral and social rejects of society. Jesus habitually "welcomes" (*prosdechetai*, present absolute) and associates with them to the extent of eating with them.

Culturally, one shared table fellowship only with one's type or class. Earlier (14:12-14), Jesus told his host not to invite only his likes or the rich when he throws a party but the "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind", who cannot pay back so as to get a reward in heaven. Eating according to class was a problem in Corinth, where the rich ate among them and failed to socialise with the poor during the agape (the ordinary meal that preceded the celebration of the Lord's Supper), though they apparently had no problem eating together at the Lord's Table (1 Cor 11:17-32). In general, Jewish Christians had a tough time eating with Gentiles. Peter in the house of Cornelius is a clear example (Acts 10:1-48). After his visit to Cornelius, the Jerusalem brethren castigated him not because he baptised a Gentile, but because he visited and "ate with them" (Acts 11:1-18).

In Antioch, fearful of "the men from James", Peter, who had been eating with Gentiles, stopped doing so, such that Paul had to openly challenge him to his face for not living according to "the truth of the gospel" (Gal 1:11-14). This truth of the gospel requires the abolition of class and all other distinctions, since all the baptised are now one in Christ (Gal 3:25-29). He constitutes a new ground for table fellowship by breaking down all barriers of class, race and sex, and reconciling all to God by his blood on the cross (Col 1:20). This is a core fruit of the gospel, which requires faith, a crossing or transcending of all attitudinal, cultural and religiously inherited barriers. In his own mission, Jesus illustrated this by welcoming all who came to him, since none could do so unless drawn by the Father who sent him (John 6:65). The Lucan parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, underscore this message.

2. The Parable in Its Many Parts

The parable (Luke 15) has two broad parts: the Pharisees' accusation of Jesus for receiving tax collectors and sinners who draw near to him (15:1-2) and Jesus' reply to their accusation in the three parables (15:3-32): the lost sheep (vv. 4-7), the lost coin (vv. 8-10) and the lost son (vv. 11-32).

The immediate occasion of the parable (15:1-2)

The immediate occasion of the parable is the approach of tax collectors and sinners to listen to Jesus (v. 1). The tense of the verbs describing their approach as said earlier is the imperfect of habitual action. This class of people had the habit of approaching Jesus to hear his teaching. Their habitual action registers their openness as a socially marginalised class to receive Jesus' teaching, in contrast to the Pharisees.[9] The Pharisees complain (in the present absolute tense): "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (v. 2). By nature and mission, Jesus is one who welcomes sinners from the heart and eats with them. As said earlier, he came to call sinners, not the righteous to repentance. The story of the tax collector and Pharisee in the Temple illustrates contrastively, the self-righteousness characteristic of the Pharisees on the one hand and the openness of the tax collectors to God's mercy on the other (Luke 18:9-14). True to his identity, vocation and mission, Jesus commits himself to welcoming and associating with these sinners.

It is not clear whether Jesus habitually threw the party for these sinners or whether the latter did so. From the ensuing three parables, we may infer that Jesus threw the party; though there is no

[9] Greek *Pharisaioi*, Hebrew *perushim*, "the separated ones".

clear evidence of this in the gospels. Jesus invited himself to a tax collector's house: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down for I must stay at your house today" (Luke 19:1-10, v. 5). His parables of the kingdom evoke God throwing parties for invited guests.[10] In the three parables of this chapter, those who lost and found their belongings throw the party to celebrate with their neighbours. Whatever the case, this dual point, the habitual openness of the tax collectors and sinners to Jesus and Jesus' intrinsic habit of welcoming them, guides our discernment of the core meaning of the parables 15:3-32.

Prelude: The lost sheep and the lost drachma (vv. 3-7, 8-10)

In reply to the accusation that he welcomes sinners and eats with them, Jesus first draws the attention of his accusers to what they themselves do when they lose things valuable to them: a shepherd losing a sheep (vv. 3-7) and a woman losing a drachma (vv. 8-10).[11] These two parables provide examples from real life, which his audience would know and could easily identify with ("which one of you?"; "what woman?" vv. 4, 8). Striking in these parables is the lengths to which the shepherd and the woman go to search for their lost property and the corresponding, even surpassing, joy they experience when they find them.

In both parables, especially that of the lost sheep, the search effort is out of proportion to what is lost. The shepherd leaves ninety nine sheep in the desert in search of one, places it on his shoulder and apparently forgets about the ninety nine while he goes home and throws a party inviting his friends to "rejoice with me" for finding his lost sheep. The woman painstakingly sweeps out the entire house in search of the lost coin till she finds it. The drachma, Greek coin, is a feminine noun, just as sheep is masculine. The recovery of the lost items is good news to proclaim and share with neighbours, in a party. Typically, the shepherd invites his male friends (*tous philous autou*); the woman her female friends (*tas philas autou*). Men celebrate with men; women with women. The celebrants in the parable of the lost son are differently construed as we will see later.

Jesus concludes each parable with the refrain "Even so there is great joy in heaven among God's angels for one repentant sinner over the ninety nine [or an unspecified number in that of the lost coin] who need no repentance" (vv. 7, 10). These life experiences prepare the audience as a prelude for the message of the parable of the lost son. We know not how the sheep got lost; sheep have a propensity to stay together; so a lost sheep causes great anxiety since it is abnormal for them to stray off.[12] Was the shepherd negligent or the woman careless? Unlike sheep, coins have no mobility of their own. Important is that the owners conduct the search for their lost properties.

The gospel in these two parables is that both owners took great pains to recover their lost property and when they did, could not keep the joy to themselves but had to share it with neighbours. The gospel is by nature to be shared, not kept for oneself, as Pope Francis has lately reminded us in his *Evangelii Gaudium*. A proto-example is Mary of Nazareth. After the annunciation, she "went with all speed/haste" (*meta spoudēs*; Luke 1:39) to share Elizabeth's

[10] Example is the parable of the wedding feast: Matt 22:14; Luke 14:16-24.

[11] In Northern Nigeria, for instance, the Fulani would rather die than allow anything to happen to their flock. In Amchilga, northern Cameroon, the herdsmen prefer moving with their flock to benefiting from medical services provided for them. They would prefer a veterinary to a clinic.

[12] I developed this idea in "Bibel Text 4: Verpflichtet zur Gastfreundschaft zu Gast in Nigeria" (Original in English: "Hospitality: A Task Exegesis of Matthew 25, 31-46"). *Bibel Heute* 4. Quartal (2004): 20-21.

joy. Yet before she could do that, Elizabeth shared her own joy with Mary: "How is it that …. Blessed is she who believed" (1:42). The angel Gabriel had named Mary "Full of Grace". Elizabeth now names her "She Who Believed". These three: gospel, believing and proclamation go inseparably together. Finally, both parables emphasise ownership of the lost items: my sheep, my drachma.[13] The sheep and drachma cannot share the joy; the sheep may be "happy" to rejoin the flock and its owner, not so the inanimate drachma. Both stories focus on the owners and their great joy in finding their lost properties.

The lost son (vv. 11-32)

Having told these two parables from life settings, Jesus climactically launches without any preamble into the parable of the lost son, popularly tagged "the prodigal son". The parable has three main parts: the request of the younger son and its consequences (vv. 11-20a); his father's celebration of the prodigal son (vv. 20b-24); and the reaction of the elder brother and the father's response to him (vv. 25-34). As said earlier, this is one of the most interpreted of Jesus' parables (matched perhaps by that of the Good Samaritan; Luke 10:29-37). Our concern is to discern the "good news" in this parable, and how its beneficial reception requires faith.

The request and action of the younger son (vv. 11-20a)

The parable begins by establishing the fact of ownership/relationship: "a man had two sons". As the story develops, the father, the younger son and the servants all emphasise this relationship, except the elder brother. The younger son calls the dad, "father" each time (vv. 12, 18, 21) and throughout loses no sight of this relationship even after realising his sin: "my father's hired servants", "my father" "your son" (vv. 17, 18, 19). By contrast the older brother does not evoke this relationship even once. Though the parable is tagged "of the prodigal son", the heart of the story is the father, whose prodigality towards the wayward son is beyond comprehension. Traditionally, inheritance is not shared out until the father or the one who bequeaths it dies. By asking for "a share of the inheritance that falls to me", the younger son is practically saying to the dad, "Dad, since you have refused to die, give me what is mine by right [in virtue of being your son] and let me enjoy my freedom.

The younger son sees the heritage simply as "property" ("*tēs ousias*; vv. 12, 13); from the father's perspective it is *ton bion* (v. 12), a term which primarily signifies "life, everyday life" and by extension "livelihood", "property". Without any objection to the son's request, the dad divides their inheritance, source of livelihood, between them (v. 12). In the division, the elder brother was entitled to a double share, since by custom he would be the one to take care of the family dependants after the father's death.[14] No mention is made of the mother or sister/s. In Jewish as in African cultures, women did not inherit. The case of the daughters of Zelophehad that brought about a legal provision cited below was to preserve their father's name, not their personal entitlement.[15] For the heritage to remain theirs, they had to marry within their father's clan (Num 36:1-12). Women did not count as legal persons and so had no say in issues of inheritance. Daughters could, in exceptional cases, inherit their father's property, but wives had

[13] Mama used to say proverbially: *Anie mkpo ase mkpo abanga mkpo omo* (Ibibio): It is of the owner to look after what is his or hers.

[14] See note 18 below on the Jewish provisions for "Inheritance".

[15] See further on this, Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "The Case of the Daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27,1-11) and African Inheritance Rights", *Asia Journal of Theology* 16,1 (2002) 49-85.

no inheritance rights. They themselves were the husband's property;[16] subject to being inherited after the husband's death. The husband could inherit the wife's property and in the case of levirate marriage, beget children for the dead relative (Deut 25:5-10). The hypothetical story of the woman who was married to seven brothers (Matt 22:15-22 and parallels) articulates this graphically. This cultural situation probably explains why the parable mentions no mother, though typically to Luke's inclusive approach, a woman features in the parable of the lost coin, alongside the man with the lost sheep.

The law has clear stipulations on "inheritance" (Hebrew *yerusshah*): "If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall let his inheritance pass on to his daughter; if he has no daughter, you shall give his heritage to his brothers; if he has no brothers, you shall give his heritage to his father's brothers. If he had no brothers, you shall give his heritage to his nearest relative" (Num 27:8-11). In this legal provision, "Unlike modern law, it is not the individual who appoints his heirs but the law of the Torah, though one may give preference to one rightful heir over the other. . . . The illegitimate children or children of prohibited marriages have the same rights as their legitimate brothers and sisters".[17] A father had no right to disinherit his son. If in his lifetime he gave his estate to a stranger in the form of a gift, that gift would revert to the rightful heirs after his death. A parent could also appoint "a trustee" (*epitropos*) to take care of the estate until the heirs come of age. Paul, for instance, sees the law as our *epitropos* until faith and grace came in Christ (Gal 3:21-19).

Certain truths emerge from this legal provision. Firstly, inheritance, like grace, is not something one works for, merits or deserves. It is essentially a pure gift that goes with belongingness to the family. One comes into it by birth or adoption. It is passed on from generation to generation. Secondly, one could only inherit after the death of the father or whoever passed on the inheritance. Thirdly, by God's law, inheritance was inalienable; one had no right to alienate the family inheritance. This is why Naboth prefers to stick to his small family heritage than exchange it for a bigger one from Ahab and is murdered as a result (1 Kgs 21:1-16). This too explains why the younger son, "when he came to himself", realizes that he had sinned against heaven, meaning against God (since the Israelites were not in the habit of calling recklessly God's name, especially the divine name YHWH). What he did was first and foremost a sin against God's law.

Despite the seriousness of demanding his share of the heritage before the father's death, a few days after the division, the younger son horridly gathers together his property, driven by urge to depart, and took off to a strange land. While some witnesses say he gathered "all" his property, others make the "all" emphatic implying a clean sweep. The verb describing his departure (*apedemesen*), here translated "he took off", means primarily to be absent; that is, he cut himself off from his family moorings and belongingness and went off to a far away foreign land.

There he squandered or spent recklessly in incisive thoughtless actions (registered by the aorist, *diescorpisen*), what he had to live on, or what was for his livelihood. Inheritance, like endowment fund, is what one reserves to fall back on, something not to dig into carelessly.

[16] Examples are the 8th Commandment and Ps 127:3 "Your wife a fruitful vine within [or "in the inner places of", NJB] your house", a favourite Responsorial Psalm at nuptial Masses.

[17] Philip Birnbaum, "Inheritance" in his *Encyclopaedia of Jewish Concepts* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1995), 275.

Further he did this wasteful spending in lose, immoral living.[18] When his supplies dried up or ran out (*dapanesantos*, gen. absolute), he started to feel his emptiness and resourceless-ness.[19] His being penniless was compounded by the "severe famine" in the country. From being a potential employer (as heir of his father), he now "hired himself out", literally "clung to" (*ekollēthē*) a citizen of the country who put him to feed swine as a means of survival. Swine was unclean animal to Jews; his accepting to feed swine registers how low he had sunk in his journey of self-desecration and desperation to survive, and perhaps too the contempt of the man who hired him. Jesus' audience would have been greatly shocked to hear this. To worsen matters, he longed in vain to eat (some witnesses say "fill his stomach") from the very pods, waste of food (*keratiōn*), given to the swine.

Having hit rock bottom in his journey of his self-destruction, the young man come to himself, all the while he had been running away from himself, his true identity. His desire to return home was not because he realised that he had done wrong; he was driven by hunger and the need for sheer survival. The word used for his acute hunger is the same as that of the severe famine that ravaged the country (*limos*, vv. 14, 17).[20] His devised penitential formula is calculated more to get him access to free food in his father's house, than due to repentance. Famishing hunger and the desperate need for survival pushed him to return to his father's house. The surplus food his father's many "hired servants" (*misthioi*) ate in abundance (*perriseuontai* v. 17) would have been in excess of their daily pay, as happened in traditional African settings where hired workers were given food in addition to their pay.

The father's embrace of the prodigal son (vv. 20b-24)

The heart of the parable is the father's response to this vagabond, wasteful son. The unimaginable in his response gets lost in or is difficult to capture in translations. The words used to describe the father's sentiment underscore the gospel in this parable. The son's reckless and wasteful living pales in significance compared to the father's wholehearted, even wasteful, senseless welcoming embrace of him.

Structurally, the son's journey home starts in verse 20a. The father's response interrupts in verse 20b, instead of verse 21, as one would have expected; it cuts into or anticipates the son's move even before he reaches home. The son's hungry wearied steps back ("while he was still a long way off") contrasts sharply with the haste with which he left home. This in turn is outmatched by the father's excitement and running to meet him while he was still a long way off (that is, even before the son saw him or could say anything). Was he always looking out hoping that one day the son would return? The father "was moved with pity" for the son when he saw him. The verb *splangchniszomai* "feel sorry" of "show pity" describes a visceral action that instinctively drives one to compassionate action, "Can a mother forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb?" (Isa 49:5). It is like the surge of adrenalin that the body generates to enable one instinctively surmount a life threatening situation; or the pangs of childbirth that comes suddenly on a woman and cannot be stopped. The same verb is used to describe Jesus'

[18] In the Greek one can feel his recklessness in the repetition of *ō* and the *z* mimicked by *s* in *zōn asōtōs*, a life that was actually dissolution of life.

[19] The verb *hystereistai* describing his "being in want" is used to describe the situation at the wedding feast of Cana when the wine that ran, also in the genitive absolute as here (John 2:3).

[20] Famine in the Book of Ruth drove Naomi and his family into pagan land for survival; instead of survival she lost her husband and the two sons, though she gained a daughter in law who became the source of her heritage in Israel, even earning her a place in the genealogy of the Messiah (Matt 1:5).

feeling when he saw the plight of the widow of Nain, whose only son (her only means of livelihood and status in society) was being carried out for burial (Luke 7:11-17). Jesus acted instinctively, without being asked.[21] Driven by the same compassion, welling from his entrails, the dad ran; and with the energy gathered in the running "fell on his neck"; hugged and kissed him.[22] Kissing arises from deep intimacy and affection, which is why Jesus asks Judas whether he betrays him with a kiss. Kiss and betrayal are mutually exclusive.

The father displays this heartfelt compassion and tender, deep-seated, love even before the son says anything. When in verse 21, he repeats his prepared confession formula, the father does not even hear what he says. He is too excited and full of compassionate joy to pay attention to his words. For him the son's return is all that matters, nothing else. The post positive *de* (v 22) registers this sentiment. Throughout the episode the dad says not a word to the son, perhaps too full of joyful emotion to do so (even as he was perhaps too saddened by the son's request at the beginning to say anything). Or was this to give the son space to process the unexpected, undeserved, incredible love and compassion he found in the father?

Instead of addressing or reproaching him the father eagerly rallies the servants or slaves (*tous doulous*, v. 22; not the hired workers *misthioi*) and gives them quick (*tachu*) incisive orders (the tenses are all aorist) first to rehabilitate the son: decorate him with the best robe;[23] thrust a ring into his finger and put sandals on his feet; all symbols of royalty and authority. Slaves did not wear any of these items. Did the son enjoy any of this VIP treatment before he "checked out".[24] It is not likely, especially since he was a younger son. To crown it all, the dad orders a first class banquet, marked by the order to slaughter (more graphic than "kill" because the verb is still aorist of incisive action) the fatted calf. Do it decisively, without delay. The fatted calf culturally and socially was kept for the best possible occasion, certainly not for the celebration of a son like this. The dad's reception of the son, with such great excitement, recalls Abraham's excited hospitality when he received the three strangers that came his way (Gen 18:1-8).

Strikingly the father tells the servants "let us celebrate" and make merry. The Greek *euphrantōmen* literally means "let us be wild with joy", "let our joy know no bounds" (the English "euphoria" comes from it). As hinted at the beginning, the father does not invite rich people like himself. He is too engrossed in the joy and excitement over the son's return to think of that (at least in the story). He celebrates happily with his servants "Let us celebrate". Why? "Because this son of mine was dead and has come to life, was lost and is found". The expression "this son of mine" (more emphatic than "my son" or even "this my son") draws attention to the dad claiming ownership of this good for nothing son. His excitement further recalls that of Mary of Magdala when she saw alive Jesus whom she had considered dead (John 20:11-18). Our belief in the resurrection has perhaps dulled our sense of death as finality, as Jesus' audience saw it, though the Pharisees to whom the parable is addressed believed in the resurrection afterlife. The father's reception of the son and his words to the servants recall Jesus saying at the end of the

[21] The verb, *splangchnizomai* occurs 12 times in the Gospels, mostly by Jesus, e.g., pity for the crowds (Matt 9:36; 14:4; 15:32; Mark 6:34; 8:2), the blind man (Mark 9:22), parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33).

[22] The verb to kiss (*katephilein*, a compound of *kata* (thoroughly) and *philein* (to love), noun *philos* (tender, affectionate love) expresses love from the heart, not dry impersonal love.

[23] The translations say "put on him"; but *endysate* evokes, for instance, Jerusalem rising from the sackcloth and ashes the of exile, putting off widowhood, mourning clothes, and going out beautifully decked like bride to meet Yahweh her husband (cf. Isa 61:10-11).

[24] As some Nigerians say who feel things are not working well in the country and so move to America or UK.

first two parables that there is more rejoicing among God's angels (God's messengers) over one repentant sinner than over those who need no repentance. The father, celebrating with his slaves, mirrors Jesus welcoming and eating with sinners, the action that occasioned the parable or his teaching on inviting poor and insignificant people to one's party.

The elder brother's anger and the father's plea (vv. 25-32)

A striking contrast emerges in the response of the elder brother. He had been out in the fields all day taking care of the father's (and his?) property, what was left of what the younger son pawned away was his. It seems the dad was too excited even to remember to send for him, let alone outsiders! One instinctively sympathises with him over the entire event. He hears singing and music as he draws close to the house (contrast the other son who was a long way off when the dad ran to meet and bring him back to the house), tired from the days work, feeling cheated, left out. Straight away one senses the elder brother's alienation from or strained relationship with his father. He calls to himself one of the servants, perhaps his page (*paidia* not the *douloi*/slaves who decked the son and prepared the feast), to inquire what was going on. His cautious self-isolating attitude in calling the servant aside contrasts sharply with his father's familiarity with the slaves.

Interestingly the servant emphasises the social aspect of slaughtering the fatted calf: to celebrate that the dad has his son back "whole" (*hygiasto* from *hygies*), in tact, safe and sound, without any damage. The servant is somewhat neutral in the information he gives, but would have joined in the euphoric celebration. On learning the cause, the elder brother goes into understandable rage (v. 28) and refuses to join the feast, isolating himself even further. Characteristically, the father goes to plead with him, to help him see sense in this humanly speaking senseless celebration. The dad's plea does not focus on what the son did, but that he has returned alive, safe and sound.

The elder son's reply to the father (vv. 29-30) reveals the depths of his self-isolation, his poor relationship not only with the dad, but also with the brother, the servants and himself. As the elder brother, understandably the first born, since no other son is mentioned, he had a unique place in the house. In the property divided between them, he would have had the largest share as said earlier. He knows neither the dad, nor his rights or place in the family. The servants in the house have more food than they need; yet he the first-born son has been slaving for the father "all these years". He is not even aware that all the dad has now belongs to him since the dad had divided the property between them and the younger brother had parted with his share. Or is he afraid that the younger brother would now share his portion? Would his anger have allowed him to think that far? His envisaged feast would have been exclusive, "with my friends". Contrast his father, who celebrates with his slaves. The dad had not given him even a kid (young goat) to celebrate despite his years' long unflinching obedience and loyalty to the father. Yet he had killed the fatted calf killed to celebrate the wasteful and immoral brother. It really does not make sense, humanly speaking.

The father wants him to know that the brother is as much his brother as he is his son (vv. 31-32). The elder son had said "this son of yours"; the dad retorts, "this brother of yours". Blood ties are the most fundamental, inalienable inheritance. One cannot wish away blood relationships, even if externally one denounces a person as his brother, sister or parent. The father speaks last in the story, repeating with emphasis the reason for the celebration. The Greek verb *edei* translated "it was fitting" or "it was only right" is an eschatological gospel imperative (as in John 3:7, 14, 31; 4:4). What the father says is "We could not do otherwise, had no option, than celebrate and

rejoice". Why? Because a dead son, a dead brother, has come back to life, a lost son and brother has been found.

The parable does not say whether or not the dad won over the elder brother. But it has made its point. God's joyful welcome of the repentant sinner knows no bounds. This parable complements those of the lost sheep and lost coin. Each is uniquely precious to the owner. There the owners went in search of their lost property, which did them no wilful harm. Here the dad welcomes, embraces and celebrates, with disproportionate joy and happiness, a son, who deliberately severed himself from him and his family, offended the traditions of his people, and wasted his very heritage in loose living, thus sinning against God. That deed was sufficient to exclude him for good from the family. Instead he returned to be reinstated with utmost love, compassion and wholehearted, euphoric joy, without a single word of reproach.

2. The Parable in Luke's Context

This parable is Luke's proclamation of the good news to his primarily Gentile audience like himself, to help them appropriate God's marvellous works for them (Luke 1:1-3). The good news, as said earlier, is God's incredible love and mercy for humanity. Scholars have long noted that, on the macro level, the elder brother's anger images the resentment by Jews, especially some Jewish Christians over the inclusion of Gentiles in God's salvation on equal terms with them. For years they had borne the burden of the Torah in obedience to God, while Gentiles apparently did what they liked, outside the Torah. Ephesians reminds the Gentiles that they, who once "were not a people", are now God's people, members of God's household, built on the same foundations of apostles and prophets, called to become one perfect humanity in Christ, sharing the same inheritance as God's specially chosen people (Eph 2:1-22; 4:11-16). Yet Paul, a Pharisee, recognizes that Gentiles had the Torah of conscience written in their hearts by which they were judged. Nevertheless, the Torah remained a burden to Jews, as Peter reminds his brethren, who wanted the Gentiles circumcised (Acts 15:8-11). The Jews had born the burden of the law believing all along that Gentiles would be damned; except perhaps those who became proselytes or Godfearers. Members of the Qumran community religiously cursed the sons of Belial (the Romans) thrice a day, in anticipation of the Messiah, who would come and destroy them; but only to be destroyed for good by those very sons of Belial. The gospel of Jesus rules out any exclusive appropriation of God's salvation.

The problem of table fellowship of Jews with Gentiles in Luke's context flows from their inclusion. This problem was so acute that it needed a general council, the first of the church, to address it (Acts 15). Even that did not eradicate the problem. Paul's suffering from the Judaizers who dogged his ministry everywhere shows the strength of this die hard tradition. Two thousand years later, racism is still alive and active. In the journey of conversion to the gospel, the passover from anti-gospel traditions and cultures to Christ, the social dimension is the last to participate. Inherited, ingrained racism (in America it has taken a multiplicity of disguised forms since the Obama Presidency), tribalism, the caste system (*osu* in Nigeria, the *dalits* and the free borns in India) is on the increase among Christians two thousand years after the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, God's gospel for humanity.

Luke's audience would have faced the challenge of meeting the radical demands of discipleship. Jesus requires that whoever wants to be his follower must be ready to undergo social and family dislocation even detachment from self (to use a familiar term in Spirituality) if they get in the way of the gospel. Yet to deny self, one must first find the self as Paul did (Phil 3:3-14). Jesus

dispossessed himself of divinity to make room for his humanity. This cost entails crossing the boundaries of, race, tribe, class, sex, party-spirit and so forth, even as Paul did.[25]

Message of the Parable in Today's Context

What obtained in Luke's time also obtains in ours with our peculiar colorations. The spirit of exclusiveness, looking down on sinners, lack of self-knowledge whether as a prodigal son or the elder brother, and the belief that we have to work out our salvation is still among us. Today there is the temptation to keep the faith to oneself, not to proclaim the gospel. Pope Francis reminds us that we are "not missionaries and disciples" but "missionary disciples".[26] Mission defines our core identity as disciple, even as it defined that of Jesus, the Messiah. Pope Francis testifies:

> My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an "extra" or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. *I am a mission* on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing. All around us we begin to see . . . people who have chosen deep down to be with others and for others.[27]

Mission entails, essentially, a going out, crossing of boundaries, transcending of barriers and leveling all ranks. This missionary movement started in God, who "loved the world so much that he gave his uniquely beloved son" (John 3:16). In Jesus of Nazareth, divinity came to meet humanity, becoming flesh (John 1:1-2, 14). Mission requires going out and shifting ground, even within one's own environment, family and self.

On exclusiveness, today's racism, tribalism, developing and sustaining ghettos in the church under whatever pretext is anti-gospel. Committee of friends, state associations and associations of priests, sisters and seminarians are growing by leaps and bounds. These associations are not for promoting the gospel, but for ensuring that the gospel agents who form these fellowships are well looked after and can support one another, especially when it comes to celebrations of ordinations, religious professions, jubilees and so forth. Pope Francis would call this being a "self-referential" church, rather than a missionary church.[28] Some of these groups are mafia like, threatening with "excommunication" eligible members who refuse to join the associations: "Unless you join us, we will not attend even your funeral". These practices count among what Pope Francis terms "spiritual worldliness".[29] They cut at the heart of the gospel. God, our loving Father and Mother, would not give us even a kid for such celebrations.

Pope Francis includes the following among those marginalized in the church and in society the poor (*EG* nos. 186-121), the vulnerable (209-216), the economically disadvantaged (202-208) and the economy itself that excludes (53-54). The greatest challenge of inclusion for the church

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[25] See the essays in *Paul Embodiment of the Old and New Testaments*, Acts of CABAN, vol. 2 (edited by Luke Ijezie, Teresa Okure and Camillus Umoh; Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2013), esp., Teresa Okure, "'Christ the End of the Law' (Rom 10:4): An Index to Paul's Conversion Experience," 26-48.

[26] Pope Francis, *EG*, 120.

[27] Pope Francis, EG, 273.

[28] Pope Francis spoke of this as Cardinal Bergoglio in his intervention before the conclave that elected him Pope, published by Cardinal Jaime Ortega of Havana with permission from Pope Francis. See full text by Radio Vatican: http//en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/03/27/bergolios_intervention_a_diagnosis_of_the_problems_in_the_church/en1-677267.

[29] Pope Francis, *EG*, 93-97. Italics original.

is that of women. While Pope Francis, more insistently than even John Paul II, has argued for greater roles for women in the church, the question of the inclusion of women remains a task to address according to "the of the gospel" (Gal 1:11-14). In its magnitude and far reaching consequences, as I perceived over twenty-five years ago, the challenge of this inclusion parallels, and in many ways, outstrips that of the inclusion of the Gentiles.[30] Approaching the problem from tradition and the teaching of the church rather than from the gospel and Christ will not yield any just solution. Only in Christ and in God's plan for the male and female, will we arrive at a Spirit-filled solution, as the council of Jerusalem arrived at a gospel-based solution to the Gentile question by aligning themselves with the Holy Spirit ("It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us", Acts 15:28). The Spirit alone leads and continues to lead the church to the complete truth (John 16:12-13). The Women Question remains to be dispassionately raised from the perspective of "God's Gospel" (Rom 1:2-3, 16), Jesus of Nazareth, "born of woman" (Gal 4:4), "son of Mary" (Mark 6:4), in whom all barriers of race, class and sex are radically transcended (cf. Gal 3:28); not from that of tradition and the teachings of the Church Fathers.

Table fellowship among Christians is still a problem today as it was in the early church. Then the agape preceded the Eucharistic celebration. Today communal meals follow the Eucharistic celebration on big occasions like ordinations, weddings and funerals. Bishops and superior generals are assigned one place, priests and religious another; the laypeople yet another. This may be a matter of convenience; but fundamentally, are we less guilty of segregation based on class and rank? The argument on convenience pales in significance when "men of order" police the entrance to the VIP places to keep out the undesirables. In the reception of the Eucharist itself, we eat hierarchically. The priests receive under both species, not the lay faithful: a matter of convenience? What do these practices say about the good news, and Jesus' own mingling freely with sinners and eating with them? Do they reveal that we have missed out, or been socialized into missing out, on an essential aspect of the gospel of Jesus who came to level all ranks in himself? A master or mistress would find it naturally demeaning to drink from the same Eucharistic cup with his or her domestic staff. Yet the early Jewish Christians had to overcome something worse than social rank in order to share table fellowship together: their entire God-given Torah upbringing which ordained their separation from the Gentiles.

To meet the specific challenge of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, it has been suggested, for instance, that instead of announcing at Communion time that only those "in the state of grace" should go forward to receive Communion. Perhaps we should announce that those in this state of grace should sit down and enjoy their sanctity, while the sinners should go to Jesus to be healed and sanctified by him. The fact that they are in the church means they are drawing near to hear what Jesus has to say. The mere thought of this suggestion is shocking, like the shock the elder brother received. But if we take Jesus seriously then we need to review this matter, especially since some of those said to be "in the state of grace" are by Jesus' standards, grossly in need of being saved from their sins. We leave aside the issue of paedophile priests that has rocked and its still rocking the church and its unexposed equivalents in our contexts or the chief celebrants; but what of those in clandestine, nocturnal practices among which are sadly clergy, religious and reputed laity? God knows them, even if they appear to hide from the public

[30] Teresa Okure, "Women in the Bible", in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*; edited by Virginia Fabella and Mercy A. Oduyoye (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books) 47-59.

human eye. These may count among those Pope Francis describes as corrupt, hypocrites, different from sinners.

> [They] look on from above and afar, they reject the prophecy of their brothers and sisters, they discredit those who raise questions, they constantly point out the mistakes of others and they are obsessed by appearances. Their hearts are open only to the limited horizon of their own immanence and interests, and as a consequence they neither learn from their sins nor are they genuinely open to forgiveness. This is a tremendous corruption disguised as a good. We need to avoid it by making the Church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor.[31]

In many of his homilies, the Pope includes as corrupt those who deprive the poor yet make fat donations to the church to be applauded.

Today many staunch and devoted Christians (especially Catholics), like the elder son, spend their lives "slaving" for God. They know neither themselves nor their worth in God's house, and fail to appreciate the inalienable heritage God has given them by making them "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:14-17). They believe their salvation depends on their sweat and strenuous efforts to please God; and then expect God to pay back or reward them accordingly. "The truth of the gospel" is that nobody can be the author of his or her salvation (cf. Ps 49:7). The notion of grace rules this out completely. "When the goodness and kindness of God our saviour appeared, it was not because of any righteous actions we ourselves had done" (Tit 3:4-8).

The law requires personal effort to be effective. Like the Pharisee in the Temple, one can satisfactorily boast of one's achievements in keeping the law over others. What "grace and truth", the real, the main that came with Jesus (John 1:17) require is radically different. All without exception receive salvation as totally free and unmerited gift. As in life one adds nothing to becoming the son or daughter of one's parents, so no one becomes God's child except by God's own will (John 1:12-13), effected in the Son. He alone sets sinners free and gives them the right to permanent residence as sons and daughters in God's house and family (John 8:31). All one can offer is ceaseless thanksgiving to God and show this gratitude by proclaiming God's good news to others, free of charge. "You received without charge, give without charge" (Matt 10:8). This goes against the grain of today's anti-gospel trends. Yet these negative trends can never invalidate God's gospel, which is not that of humans or from "an angel from heaven" (Gal 1:8).

In the remote context of the parable, Jesus had invited whoever wanted to be his follower to be prepared to endure social and family dislocation, even detachment from self, if these get in the way of the gospel. Jesus dispossessed himself of divinity to make room for his humanity. Paul as already seen made a clean sweep of all that, prior to his conversion, he held most dear because they were incompatible with the gospel, with his being in Christ. Today the readiness to bear the cross must be emphasised against the onslaught of prosperity gospel that would empty Jesus' gospel of its cross thus breeding immature Christians;[32] not only the prosperity gospel but also the gospel that projects God as one who destroys sinners. Some, inspired by the Psalmist, would

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[31] Pope Francis, *EG*, 97. In his homilies, he includes, for instance, as corrupt those who deprive the poor yet make fat donations to the church to be applauded.

[32] See J. Lee Grady, "5 Ways the Prosperity Gospel Is Hurting Africa" (Twitter at @leegrady), accessed on 14 November, 2013.

delight in "uprooting from the city of God all who do evil" (Ps 101:8);[33] and pray God to destroy their enemies instead of praying for their conversion, or demand capital punishment for murderers even when they have wholeheartedly repented. These beliefs and practices cut at the root of the gospel.[34] These and similar psalms and the anti-enemy theology in the OT generally, stem from a religious and cultural worldview, alien to the gospel, though similar to the African one. In the Great Charter of the kingdom, Jesus tells his disciples to love, not hate their enemies, unlike what they heard from their ancestors (Matt 5:43-48).

Conclusion: Duc in altum

The question was asked in the beginning of this study how faith comes into play in the parable of the prodigal son when it is not mentioned at all. My insight from listening to this parable in the context of our convention theme is that we humans find it hard, if not impossible, to believe in a God, who loves passionately, goes in search of and celebrates repentant sinners without sanctions, as illustrated by the father of the prodigal son. More fundamentally, we find it even harder to believe that God can love us sinners to the extent of becoming substantially one with us "in all things except sin" (Heb 4:15); that God reached out to sinners by giving that which was the most precious to God, God's fattened calf, "his uniquely beloved Son" (or "only begotten God", *monogenēs theos* [John 1:18])) "to save", not "to judge and condemn the world" (John 3:16-17). Jesus in turn plays out this incredible love of God for sinners by loving to "the end", "the utmost limit" (*eis telos*), the limit beyond which it is utterly impossible to go (13:1-2; 15:13) as he tells Juliana of Norwich in *Revelations of Divine Love*.[35] Or in Jesus' own words, "Greater love has no one than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). As proof of this love, he gives us his body and blood for food and drink unto eternal life, and his "life for the salvation of the world" (Matt 20:28). Jesus' parable of prodigal son graphically illustrates this truth.

The new evangelisation is about the transmission, reception and proclamation of the gospel in faith. The gospel of God searching for sinners serves as indispensable core component in the renewed commitment to Jesus' missionary mandate to proclaim the gospel to all nations (Matt 28:18-20). Acceptance and proclamation of the gospel of God's unconditional love for sinners without exception concretized in Christ requires the faith the early Christians had and have left us as a legacy. The reception and transmission of this gospel is the task of every baptised Christian. Jesus proclaimed this gospel in the totality of life. His disciples, individually and collectively, are called to do the same. Christians, who wandered off, need to be helped to "come to themselves", return home for royal reception by God's family.

In sum, the gospel in the parable of the prodigal son challenges us as church to review our entire attitude towards those who err in one way or the other. Using the sacraments to punish people who annoy the clergy and bishops is abhorrent to the gospel. As church and individuals, we need to cultivate the habit of welcoming "sinners" and associating with them as Jesus did, knowing fully well that we are all sinners, unless we are liars (1 John 1:8). When we do this, God's salvation will reach the inner recesses of our lives, families, church and society and bring about radical transformation. In the words of John Paul II, we need to launch into the deep (*duc in*

[33] Ironically the Psalm is a song of "mercy and justice" (v 1).

[34] On this and similar psalms and anti-enemy theology in the OT generally, it is good to remember their cultural backdrop. In the gospel charter of the kingdom, Jesus tells his disciples to love not hate their enemies

[35] "If there was anything more I could possibly have done to show how mush I loved you ['you' being 'humanity], I would have done it". Juliana of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (A Penguin Book); Veronica Mary Rolf, *Juliana's Gospel: Illumining the Life and Revelations of Juliana of Norwich* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013).

altum),[36] by making the gospel the organizing principle of our self-understanding and of all we do as individuals and as church after the example of Jesus.

[36] John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), no. 53 and passim.