

4th SUNDAY IN LENT

Year C

Of course we all know about Gordon Ramsay. He is a chef who runs many fine restaurants around the world. But he is perhaps as famous for his aggressive manner and his foul language as he is for his food. At one stage he had been awarded more Michelin stars than any other British chef in history, yet he is more likely to make the headlines for his loud mouth than for mouth-watering food. One diner caught the sharp edge of Gordon Ramsay's tongue when he asked for sauce with his meal. Ramsay told the diner to get out. Only of course he added a few words that are probably not appropriate to repeat in this place.

But I reckon Gordon Ramsay has a point. His team of chefs had worked hard to produce amazing food of the highest quality and yet this customer wanted to undermine all that work by covering his meal in sauce. The diner was not prepared to accept the authority and expertise of a team of dedicated chefs. Perhaps it was the customer who gave the first insult.

With respect to Gordon Ramsay – he's probably a very good man with an attitude problem –we're not really drawing any parallels between Gordon Ramsay and Jesus, but today's Gospel reading nearly provides us with an opportunity. At the beginning of the reading we heard how Jesus was sitting with the tax collectors and sinners. We also heard that this group was being watched by the Pharisees and the Scribes. The parable that Jesus tells is addressed to both these groups – the sinners and the smug ones - and there is a message for each.

We are so familiar with the story of the prodigal son, and its message telling how the returning son is forgiven and accepted, that we tend to see the whole point of the story as showing how those sinners sitting around Jesus can be confident of forgiveness. And that's a nice message – especially if we have no difficulty in recognising our own sinfulness. We can easily overlook the purpose this parable plays in the bigger narrative of Jesus and his on-going conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees. This parable appears as one of a number of episodes in Luke's Gospel where these folk give Jesus a hard time. Each time Jesus calmly and gently offers them the opportunity to repent and be reconciled with him, while at the same time

showing them that their continued words and actions against him alienate them from the God to whom they so proudly claim to devote their lives. It was Jesus who had the God-given authority and expertise.

In today's parable the Pharisees and scribes are like the loyal brother who sees his wayward sibling return, but instead of joy feels only jealousy and hurt. Jesus does not tell us whether the brother puts his feelings behind him and joins the party, or whether he stays outside brooding and sulking. The parable finishes leaving the Pharisees and scribes with a choice – to join in rejoicing at the Good News of forgiveness and reconciliation that Jesus brings, or to continue their petulant behavior, which will ultimately drive them away from the joy that Jesus offers.

The kingdom Jesus proclaims, full of tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners, is not what the Pharisees and scribes believe their God promises for them. They cannot recognize their proud rule-bound God in Jesus. Jesus, on the other hand, makes clear that all are welcome. Pharisees and sinners alike. Like the awkward diner at Gordon Ramsay's restaurant, it is the Pharisees and scribes themselves who cut themselves off from the rich experience offered to them. They demand that God gives them what they want in the form of the kind of Messiah who will not consort with sinners; and in so doing they willingly alienate themselves from the God whose primary aim is love.

As you would expect, Jesus has far better grace than Gordon Ramsay. Rather than telling the Pharisees and scribes to get out and barring them for ever from his presence, Jesus' response is rooted in God's love. In later chapters of Luke's Gospel, Jesus reiterates his invitation to all. Jesus continues to offer his welcome to Pharisees and scribes. St Paul is the most famous Pharisee to have repented his persecuting ways and to have received God's loving forgiveness. And Christ himself, in the ultimate gesture of loving kindness, asks his Father for the forgiveness of those who have brought about his suffering and death even as he hangs dying on the cross. When it comes to reflecting God's acceptance and hospitality, Jesus and Paul are going to run rings around Gordon Ramsay.