

John Henry Newman and the Parable of the two Brothers and the Merciful Father



Benedict XVI speaks of the parable of the two brothers and the merciful Father as “perhaps the most beautiful parable of Jesus”¹. Pope Francis often refers to this parable to recall “the infinite mercy of God”². Today many know this parable but they do not perceive its true content. Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890) as a young Anglican pastor took two sermons in which he explained the interior disposition of the two brothers. In this meditation we look to welcome the message of these sermons, contemplating them with some of Newman’s thoughts on the goodness of the merciful Father.

1. The prodigal son

In the sermon “Christian Repentance”³ (20 November 1831) Newman describes - in the style of the Fathers of the Church – the journey of the prodigal son as the journey of all humanity: each one of us has fallen, each one of us has been far from the Father, each one of us has been called to open his or her self again to the merciful love of the Father. This journey of returning, however, does not happen without the collaboration of the human person and is not always realized, as it is in the parable, at a fixed time. Newman characterizes the return to the Father always as a journey of repentance, a work that never ends: “Repentance is a work carried on at diverse times, and but gradually and with many reverses perfected. Or rather, and without any change in the meaning of the word repentance, it is a work never complete...; we are ever but beginning; the most perfect Christian is to himself but a beginner, a penitent prodigal, who has squandered God's gift”⁴.

Newman then searches to determine the *nature* of all true repentance. Placing in the center the words of the prodigal son: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers” (Lk 15:18-19). A hired worker may be compared to a called servant fulfilling his duty. When a man begins to become aware of his sinfulness and decides to take the road of a new

¹ Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Volume I: *From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2007, p. 202.

² Pope Francis, General Audience, 11 May 2016.

³ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons III*, Longmans, Green & Co, London 1903, p. 90-101.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

life, he asks himself: what do I need to do? Such a man should be advised, says Newman, “to go to Church regularly, to say his prayers morning and evening, and steadily to read the Scriptures”⁵.

Given that he is habituated to doing what he pleases and to living far from God, at the beginning such a man perceives these duties as a burden: “Such is the state of those who *begin* religious obedience. They do not see anything come of their devotional or penitential services, nor do they take pleasure in them; they are obliged to defer to God's word simply because it is His word; to do which implies faith indeed, but also shows they are in that condition of a servant which the prodigal felt himself to be in at best”⁶. The prodigal did not experience significant emotions on his return journey, but he prayed that the Father would accept him as one of his hired workers. Newman comments: “We *must begin* religion with what looks like a form. Our fault will be, not in beginning it as a form, but in continuing it as a form. For it is our duty to be ever striving and praying to *enter* into the real spirit of our services, and in proportion as we understand them and love them, they will cease to be a form and a task, and will be the real expressions of our minds. Thus shall we gradually be changed in heart from servants into sons of Almighty God”⁷. Repentance is thus connected to the availability and obedience of a hired servant, an availability, certainly, that is wrapped in the mercy of the Father, and introduces into the fascination of the new life of the children of God.



In the second part of the sermon Newman seeks to understand the *motives* that move the prodigal son to return to the Father. He mentions the fact that the Old Covenant knew of numerous sacrifices to expiate the sins of the people. The prophets and the psalms, then, invited the believers to offer to God “a contrite, humbled heart” (Ps 51:19). As evidenced by Newman, the Lord Jesus “has shown us in all things a more perfect way than was ever before shown to man. As He promises us a more exalted holiness ... and a fuller knowledge of truth, so He gives us a more true and noble repentance. The most noble repentance ... is an *unconditional surrender* of himself to God, not a bargaining about terms, not a scheming (so to call it) to be received back again, but an instant *surrender* of himself in the first instance... Such is that perfect way which nature shrinks from, but which our Lord enjoins in the parable, a surrender”⁸.

⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

⁶ Ibid., p. 93.

⁷ Ibid., p. 93f.

⁸ Ibid., p. 96f.

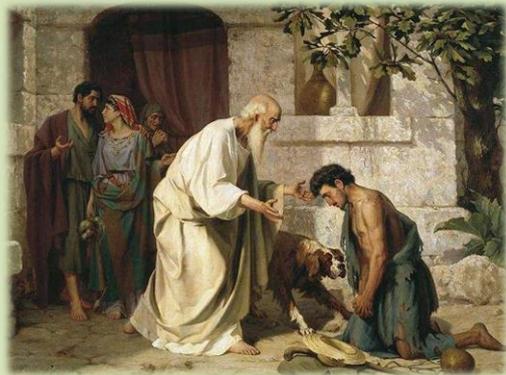
Newman holds that this trust constitutes the nucleus of Christian repentance: “Such must be Christian repentance: First we must put aside the idea of finding a remedy for our sin; then, though we feel the guilt of it, yet we must set out firmly towards God... He, indeed, meets us on our way with the tokens of His favor, and so He bears up human faith, which else would sink under the apprehension of meeting the Most High God; still, for our repentance to be Christian, there must be in it that generous temper of self-surrender, the acknowledgment that we are unworthy to be called any more His sons, the abstinence from all ambitious hopes of sitting on His right hand or His left”⁹.

In conclusion, Newman asks himself if this type of repentance may not be too demanding for us, and above all for those that are at the beginning of the journey of faith. “The parable”, says Newman, “teaches us what the character of the true penitent is, not how men actually *at first* come to God. The longer we live, the more we may hope to *attain* this higher kind of repentance”¹⁰. Repentance must permeate the entire life of the Christian: “It is when the Christian has long fought the good fight of faith ... and by experience knows how few and how imperfect are his best practices; then it is that he is able to acquiesce, and most gladly acquiesces in the statement, that we are accepted by faith only in the merits of our Lord and Saviour”¹¹. Newman, in the end, finds that the true motivation to entrust oneself to the Lord is the self-donation of Jesus himself, summarized in the words of St. Paul: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15). The gaze toward the crucified Lord awakens in us true repentance and constantly invites us to abandon ourselves to Him with great faith. He is the Saviour who is able to change us sinners into children of God.

2. The older son

In the second sermon “Contracted Views in Religion”¹² (4 December 1831) Newman compares the older son “to the labourers in the vineyard, who complained of their master”¹³ and seeks to bring to light his interior sentiments.

The behaviour of the Father, in his interactions with the penitent son, may seem, at first glance, as an “evident departure from the rules of fairness



⁹ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 97f.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 98.

¹² John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons Vol III*, Longmans, Green & Co, London 1903, p. 102-112.

¹³ Ibid., p. 102.

and justice”¹⁴. Newman, indeed asks himself “For what is our great stay and consolation amid the perturbations of this world? The truth and justice of God. This is our one light in the midst of darkness”¹⁵. To confront the difficulty that on this earth evildoers often do well and the good suffer, God “has vouchsafed again and again to declare the unswerving rule of His government favor to the obedient, punishment to the sinner”¹⁶. Based on similar thoughts, the older son is not able to understand why the Father may have organized a feast for the son who had returned, while he has never received such a gift. His incomprehension is demonstrated with these words: “Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends” (Lk 15:29). Such words bring to light that while the older brother remained at home, he is interiorly far from the Father.

How does the Father respond to this rebuke? Newman describes the response as instructive: it “sanctions the great truth, which seemed in jeopardy, that it is *not* the same thing in the end to obey or disobey, expressly telling us that the Christian penitent is not placed on a footing with those who have consistently served God from the first”¹⁷. The Father, indeed, says: “My son, *you* are here with me always; everything I have is yours“ (Lk 15:31). The father wants almost to recall how he loves his older son: “*Thou* art in My confidence... *Thou* art *ever* with Me; and canst thou really grudge that I should, by one mere *act* of rejoicing, show My satisfaction at the sinner's recovery, and should console him with a promise of mercy, who, before he heard of it, was sinking down under the dread of deserved punishment”¹⁸. For what reason is the older son not able to understand the behaviour of the Father in his interaction with the repentant son? Why does he remain in his anger and does not want to enter into the house to participate in the joy of his brother who is now found?



Newman looks to respond to these questions in different steps, searching to enter into the heart of the older brother. He mentions above all else a thought too narrow minded, too human, too dictated by pure routine: “The elder brother had always lived at home; he had seen things go on one way, and, as was natural and right, got attached to them in that one way... He thought he understood his Father's ways and principles far more than he did, and when an occurrence took place, for which he had hitherto met with no precedent, he lost himself... We should be on our guard lest we suppose ourselves to have such a clear

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 104

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁸ Ibid.

knowledge of God's ways, as to rely implicitly on our own notions and feelings”¹⁹. God is different and greater than what we imagine him to be. His ways are more diverse and marvellous than what we think. We must not box God within our small horizons, but remain open to His way of acting, which often surprises us. Not preconceived ideas, but a generous opening to His action: this is the correct attitude in our relationship with God.

Newman goes further and describes the character of the older brother as arrogant. According to him, that Christians that are on this track “become not only over-confident of the knowledge of God's ways, but positive in their over-confidence. They do not like to be contradicted in their opinions, and are generally most attached to the very points which are most especially of their own devising. They forget that all men are at best but learners in the school of Divine Truth, and that they themselves ought to be *ever* learning, and that they may be sure of the truth of their creed, without a like assurance in the details of religious opinion”²⁰. Newman is convinced that true faith is always open “with quick eyes and ears, for tokens of God's will, whether He speak in the way of nature or of grace”²¹. Not arrogance, but reverence and availability toward the divine providence characterizes authentic Christians.

In a third step Newman presents the attitude of the older son also as an expression of ingratitude. Authentic faith is always connected with gratitude: “God works wondrously in the world; and at certain times His providence puts on a new aspect. Religion seems to be failing, when it is merely changing its form. God seems for an instant to desert His own appointed instruments, and to be putting honor upon such as have been framed in express disobedience to His commands. For instance, sometimes He ... seems to bless the efforts of those who have separated from His Holy Church more than those of His true laborers. Here is the trial of the Christian's faith, who, if the fact is so, must not resist it, lest happily he be found fighting against God, nor must he quarrel with it after the manner of the elder brother. But he must take everything as God's gift, hold fast his *principles*, not give *them* up because appearances are for the moment against them, but believe all things will come round at length”²². Faith in divine providence, therefore, does not signify uncertainty or instability, but a humble steadfastness in the truth of Jesus Christ.

Finally, Newman warns us against a vice that corrupted the older brother: the discontent which can transform us into hardness: “Let us guard against discontent in any shape; and as we cannot help hearing what goes on in the world, let us guard, on hearing it, against all intemperate, uncharitable feelings towards those who differ from us, or oppose us. Let us pray for our enemies; let us try to make out men to be as good as they can fairly and safely

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 108f.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 110f.

be considered; let us rejoice at any signs of repentance, or in any marks of good principle in those who are on the side of error. Let us be forgiving”²³. Contentment and joy in the gifts of others: these attitudes protect us from the hardness of heart of the older brother, and give us serenity and peace.

3. The merciful Father



In the two discourses of 1831 Newman speaks only a little about the merciful Father, while in other sermons he paints a beautiful image of the Father. An example for this is the discourse on “A Particular Providence as Revealed in the Gospel”²⁴ (5 April 1835), with which I would like to conclude these reflections.

Newman affirms that, prior to the coming of Christ, the human person had the knowledge of “some occasional awareness of God's regard for individuals, but, for the most part, instructed merely in His general Providence, as seen in the course of human affairs”²⁵. The Gospel, however, reveals to us clearly “this distinct regard, vouchsafed by Almighty God to every one of us”²⁶.

We need, however, to consider that this revelation of individual providence appears connected with more than a little *difficulty* to our intellect. Newman recalls above all that we Christians are often like other people, who leave themselves dragged by the waves that flow in the currents on the world with little true understanding of an individual providence: “We conceive that Almighty God works on a large plan; but we cannot realize the wonderful truth that He sees and thinks of individuals. We cannot believe He is really present everywhere, that He is wherever we are, though unseen. ... We know He is in heaven, and forget that He is also on earth”²⁷. This lack of faith is “the reason why the multitude of men are so profane... they allow themselves to be lukewarm and indifferent... because they have no grasp of a truth, which nevertheless they have no intention to deny, that God sees them”²⁸.

Newman continues by explaining that these difficulties increase when people are tried by the misery of this world. Then when others are no longer interested in them “they despair, because they themselves do not realize the loving-kindness and the presence of God. They

²³ Ibid., p. 111f.

²⁴ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons III*, Longmans, Green & Co, London 1903, p. 114-127.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 114.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 115.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 116.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 116f.

find no comfort in a truth which to them is not a substance but an opinion”²⁹. Faith in providence not being a reality in their life, “does not lessen their sorrow, because they have not accustomed their minds to feel that He is a merciful God, regarding them individually”³⁰.

Starting from the Gospel, Newman gives evidence, in the second part of his sermon, that the “most winning property of our Saviour's mercy is its tender discrimination. It regards and consults for each individual as he comes before it”³¹. To understand how he takes care of us – says Newman – Jesus “has taken upon him the thoughts and feelings of our own nature, which we all understand *is* capable of such personal attachments”³². God has drawn near to us, in Jesus his loving mercy shines, as well as his love: “This might be illustrated ... done, by our Lord's tender behavior towards Lazarus and his sisters, or His tears over Jerusalem; or by His conduct towards St. Peter, before and after his denial of him, or towards St. Thomas when he doubted, or by His love of His mother, or of St. John”³³.

These thoughts are able to be yet deepened if we consider the disposition of Our Lord towards the lowly and unknown who came to him: “All-holy, Almighty as He is, ... He could display a tender interest in all who approached Him; as if He could not cast His eyes on any of his creatures without the overflowing affection of a parent for his child, regarding it with a full satisfaction, and simply desiring its happiness and highest good.”³⁴. Newman mentions in this context, for example, the love of Jesus towards the rich man (cf. Mk 10:21) as well as to His compassion with the leper that he healed (cf. Mk 1:41). In these and similar stories, the Gospel does not speak to us only of an immutable Creator, but of a Guardian full of compassion, of a Friend that is interested in each one of us.

At this point Newman turns himself directly to his listeners and treats us with a great *hymn to providence*: “God beholds thee individually, whoever thou art. He calls thee by thy name. He sees thee, and understands thee, as He made thee. He knows what is in thee, all thy own peculiar feelings and thoughts, thy dispositions and likings, thy strength and thy weakness. He views thee in thy day of rejoicing, and thy day of sorrow. He sympathizes in thy hopes and thy temptations. He interests Himself in all thy anxieties and remembrances, all the risings and fallings of thy spirit. He has numbered the very hairs of thy head and the cubits of thy stature. He compasses thee round and bears thee in his arms; He takes thee up and sets thee down. He notes thy very countenance, whether smiling or in tears, whether healthful or sickly. He looks tenderly upon thy hands and thy feet; He hears thy voice, the beating of thy heart, and thy very breathing. Thou dost not love thyself better than He loves

²⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 118.

³¹ Ibid., p. 120.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 120f.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 121.

thee... Thou art not only His creature..., thou art man redeemed and sanctified, His adopted son, favored with a portion of that glory and blessedness which flows from Him everlastingly unto the Only-begotten. Thou art chosen to be His... Thou wast one of those for whom Christ offered up His last prayer, and sealed it with His precious blood. What a thought is this, a thought almost too great for our faith!”³⁵



In this sermon Newman outlines a beautiful image of the merciful Father who is interested in each one of us, without falling into trite thought. He concludes with an urgent invitation: “Let us then endeavour, by His grace, rightly to understand where we stand, and what He is towards us; most tender and pitiful, yet, for all His pity, not passing by the breadth of a single hair the eternal lines of truth, holiness, and justice”³⁶.

Conclusion

In the sermons upon which we have meditated, Newman presents the fascinating journey of following Christ and the importance of faith in the providence of God. Such a faith, rooted in a profound trust in the merciful love of the Father, is able to provoke in us that spirit of repentance that pushes the prodigal son to return home. A similar faith is able to keep us from the hardness of heart of the older son, that prevented him from opening himself to the mercy of the Father and of rejoicing with his brother. Trust, repentance, gratitude and joy with others characterize the life of these Christians that not only know the parable of the two brothers and of the merciful Father, but also put it into practice.

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³⁵ Ibid., p. 124f.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 127.