

## MARCH 7, 2026 DEACON STEPHEN BARRINGER

In today's Gospel, we heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This is certainly one of the best-known stories in the Bible. Even people who aren't religious or who don't read the Bible know this story. It has crossed over into popular culture. I even saw a comedian the other night on the television refer to it. He said, "Who was most upset when the prodigal son came home? It wasn't the older brother. It was the fatted calf."

Whole books have been written over this one topic. University courses, week-long retreats, and, of course, many, many sermons and homilies. On our Daily TV Mass, we only have a few minutes to preach. So, I'm not going to even try to compete with the many scholars of the Church and go into all the rich depths of the teachings of this parable, but I would like to focus on one short phrase that is right in the middle of the story. And that phrase is, "When he came to himself."

Without that phrase, there is no story. If the prodigal son hadn't come to himself, who knows what might have happened? Without him realizing exactly what he was doing to himself, he wouldn't have found the courage or the hope to admit his faults and change his ways.

We use many expressions in our language to express that moment of coming to ourselves, that moment of realization. We say, "I came to my senses," or "I woke up to what was going on." "I looked in the mirror. The penny dropped. Eureka!" And sometimes even without words. We use these expressions to show us that things have changed. We've suddenly come to an understanding.

And if the young man had not thought through what he was doing with his life, he may have continued to act in an entitled way and continued in his misery, blaming everything and everybody else for his troubles as things got worse and worse. Or he may have even turned to crime, to steal what he wanted, because he was sure it should belong to him. He may have even given in to despair and taken his own life rather than face the truth.

But he came to himself and he thought about how he had sinned. The ancient philosopher Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living," and, for the young man in the story, and for ourselves today, who call ourselves Christians, this is also true. The prodigal son stopped and admitted that he had sinned before God and before the father.

We are called today to stop and examine our lives in the same way, to admit where we have failed to love and sinned against what Jesus has taught us. The son in the story today had hit rock bottom, and it made him examine his life. Why is it that so many people will not change until everything falls apart?

We read in many of the processes for dealing with people with addiction, they'll often say, "Stand back and let them hit the bottom," because there can be no conversion, no turning around, until we realize there's nowhere else to go. Why is it that we don't look at what's going on in our lives while things are still going okay?

You know, we are in a season of Lent, a time of almsgiving, sacrifice, and prayer, a season created by our own wise Church Fathers to help us create those conditions of suffering that make us think. Almsgiving separates us from some of the wealth that gives us the false impression that we are in control of our lives. Sacrifice helps us to feel and accept loss by depriving ourselves mostly of shallow pleasures that bring no

true, real joy. And finally, prayer gives us that chance to examine what our lives are without those things in the presence of God the Father when we come before Him, so that we may face the truth with the light of His love.

The prodigal son went to his father and confessed his sin, and we have the opportunity during Lent to receive the sacrament of reconciliation and to admit our sinfulness, even while our lives may be going alright, instead of waiting until those lives have broken down and crashed. We are here at the Eucharist to thank God, and we always begin with a confession of our sin. So, let us not simply mouth those words without honestly examining our real lives, and reflecting in our hearts the real sins and failings that we each have.

Jesus feeds us with his own body and blood. He unites us to himself in a physical and spiritual reality that allows us to call God our own Father and to go to Him as the prodigal son did, with courage, even if we have failed... to ask for the chance to be his servant as well as his children.

To come to ourselves is the most important thing we can do today, and we are called to spend time in prayer each and every day, reviewing our lives, not waiting until they've crashed. The prodigal son came to himself, and the time for us to do the same is right now.