

***Suggested Homily Outline with Scripture Reflection
Returning Catholics and the Parable of the Prodigal Son***

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Five key elements:

1. Self-Awareness
2. The embrace
3. The celebration
4. The attitude of the second son
5. Always returning

PART ONE

Self-Awareness

The parable uses the language of the son coming to himself expressing an honest self-examination, an assessment of where he is and where he belongs.

What do you think drove the son to return to reflect on his inner core? How is this change of heart reflected in our *Landings* experience?

“...when the son came to himself...”

In our *Landings* experience, we have encountered many returning Catholics who identify themselves with the returning son in this parable. Like the son, many ventured out of the world they knew in search of further fulfilment. And some just drifted away, “This world they knew” often included the faith they grew up in and venturing out often involved leaving the church and faith community.

The search for fulfilment is elusive, the search for a peace that the world cannot give. We will find that we are often let down by what we have fashioned for ourselves in our quest till we find ourselves alone and maybe despairing.

The son in the parable experienced this. He found himself hungry among the pigs and after self-examination “he came to himself”. In this “coming to himself” he realized his true identity as the child of a father who provides in abundance. With this insight, he can change. When “he came to himself”, he came to this realization. He began his returning journey back to his father.

Many returning Catholics ask the same questions as the son in the parable

“Why am I in this situation? How do I get out of this?

What is the meaning of my life? Who am I?”

When “we come to our self”, we realize our true identity as a child of God.

Our inner core is the sanctuary where God dwells, where he calls us to have that conversation and invites us to “return home”.

How can we understand the spark that can lead us to **come to ourselves**?
Can we attribute this spark to the work of the Holy Spirit?

In this parable we understand that God is faithful. Like the father he waits for us. The father, out of love, gave the son the freedom to leave. Similarly, God gives us the same freedom. Yet, because of his immense love, he will accompany us regardless of the consequences of our choices. He is always looking out for us, ready to welcome us back. When our choices go wrong, we may feel a loneliness, a form of alienation from everything and everyone around us. In this emptiness, the Holy Spirit comes in the form of Hope. Stripped of everything, we cling to hope. Following hope leads us home, like the son in the parable. Hope is our God in disguise, inviting us to return, sparked by the Holy Spirit.

PART TWO

The Embrace

“...the father ran and put his arms around his son...”

How does the father’s embrace mirror the *Landings* embrace of the returnee?

The son in the parable was unsure and even afraid of what he will encounter on his return. He was desperate and worked as a paid servant, not expecting to be his father’s son again. Returning Catholics are much like this son in their emotional state: anxious and apprehensive about their return.

How will God and the community react? They may have expected some form of judgement on their past, but instead they get an embrace.

The principles of *Landings* in being welcoming and non-judgmental are key here.

We as church learn from the parable. The returnee is always embraced.

For the returning Catholic this embrace is the pivotal moment of their process. This embrace reconciles their past, with the eye-opening truth about God’s generous love, a pivotal ‘wow’ moment with no retribution, no counting of cost. When the father and son embrace, the father does not want to hear his son’s confession. He simply wants to welcome him home and celebrate. How does this parable inform our ministry of invitation and welcome in *Landings*?

PART THREE

The Celebration

“...get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate!”

In *Landings*, we stress that the most important page is the blank page on which we write anew our faith story. Two elements, the embrace and not wanting to hear the son’s confession, open avenues of healing by providing a blank page to write on from a new perspective.

Here we can live with new eyes, seeing God present in each chapter of our life. We all have a life story and God is present to accompany our life’s choices. When we tell our

story we can find God and re-connect. This is why sharing stories of return is so vital to the process because our distant God becomes our personal God, our life story becomes our faith story.

PART FOUR

Attitude of the Second Son

The annoyance expressed by **the second son** upon his brother's return can easily be ascribed to the faithful who have never left the pews and may feel unappreciated or overlooked. How can the faithful come to appreciate the point of view of the returnee? The faithful in the pews also need to feel appreciated and valued.

“I have never disobeyed your command...”

Everyone is invited to be part of this embrace, to come and join the banquet. We recognize the second son in all of us. We may have shrouded judgement and prejudices.

Understandably, we may also feel entitled because we never left, always in the pews.

We may have to realize how these attitudes prevent us from joining the banquet.

We are all invited to mature in our spiritual life through God's generous love.

As the father in the parable welcomed his returning son, so we realize that this depth of love is something that grows and develops,

The more we do, the more this shared love will make us feel appreciated and valued. Collectively, the “second sons” are invited to participate in this spirituality. Like the father in the parable, we can shower this same love on our returning Catholics. If we do not embrace this spiritual attitude, we will continue to be lost, even though we never left. While the younger son was lost outside the church, the elder son was lost inside.

PART FIVE

Always Returning

How does the motto “**Always Returning**” help us to realize the common mission of us all?

The faithful who have never left the pews, can grasp in that earthly journey, we are “always returning” even if we have never left the pews. Attendance at mass is not the end point of our returning journey.

“Always Returning” is our response to come closer to God in how we live our life. Coming one step closer, invites us to step even closer. God's love continues to draw us closer and closer to him. There is no end point to this closeness. We are “always returning”. This is an infinite cycle. When we realize that we are all “always returning”, we can reach out in a common mission to others and help them return closer to God. Here our mission as Church is clear - the shared responsibility of those inside to reach out to those outside and accompany them as they return.