

BROKEN FAMILIES

By Jim Seghers

It was a lovely afternoon as we drove from the North Shore across the lake into New Orleans. I was the passenger as a loving and concerned father drove south to rendezvous with his son Arthur who he has not seen in many years. I could see the care and concern on the father's face as we hurried along.

Arthur, now in his forties, had become addicted to alcohol when he was in high school. The inevitable followed: expulsion from schools, problems with the law, the inability to hold a job or to establish meaningful relationships. Now estranged from the family that loves him, Arthur wanders the streets of New Orleans as a homeless person. Such is the slavery of addictions.

The father shared his pain as he watched helplessly as his son slipped deeper and deeper into the prison of addiction. There were many opportunities for recovery followed by many heart-rending failures. I couldn't help thinking of the heavenly Father's sadness when we reject him by sin. I was reminded of the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the loving father that eagerly longed for his son's return (Lk 15:20).

Thanks to the ministry of Sister Theresa, Arthur called his family and agreed to attend his grandmother's Christmas party. Arthur had agreed to meet us at 3:00 PM. Without question his presence would add a special joy to this festive occasion. His dad speculated that he would have time to buy clothes for his son and offer him the opportunity of a shower and shave before the party. In this way he might feel more comfortable and presentable.

We arrived at the halfway house on Camp Street shortly before three. I walked through the property and the adjoining yard looking for Arthur as his dad waited anxiously in the car. Arthur wasn't there. I returned chest-fallen to give the sad news to his father. Then his dad made his own careful search for his son. He wasn't there. We waited until 3:35; then the dad drove around the area in the hope that we might find his son. It also proved fruitless. We were keenly disappointed. His dad was crushed and almost in tears. We drove home with the wind taken out of our sails; we were both feeling very sad.

This incident triggered a reflection on the essay I wrote recently, *Matthew's Introduction 1:1-17*, that focused on Jesus' genealogy. The literal meaning of a text in Sacred Scripture often provides a springboard to its spiritual meanings. The literal sense of a passage is drawn from the words of the text based on sound rules of interpretation. It is the foundational sense of the Bible. However, at the same time the literal meaning of a passage often leads to a deeper spiritual meaning. Traditionally, three spiritual senses are identified.

1. The *allegorical sense* gives a more profound understanding of the events recorded by recognizing their significance in Christ's saving work. The crossing of the Dead Sea, for example, is a sign that looks to Christian baptism (cf. 1 Cor 10:2). The first Adam of

Genesis foreshadows the new Adam, Jesus Christ (Rom 5:14). The allegorical sense fosters the virtue of faith.

2. The *moral sense* that is drawn from the literal meaning leads the Christian to live justly because, in the words of St. Paul, they were written “for our instruction” (1 Cor 10:11; cf. Heb 3-4:11). Thus, the example of Jesus’ forgiveness on Calvary prompts us to forgive those who have offended us. The moral sense of Sacred Scripture promotes the virtue of charity.
3. Finally, the *anagogical sense* looks to the eternal significance of the events recorded. In this sense, for example, the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21:1-22:5). Because the anagogical sense looks to our ultimate destiny, it encourages the virtue of hope.

Looking to the spiritual significance of Jesus’ genealogy, it struck me that many of Jesus’ flawed ancestors form an apt picture of the whole broken human family that Christ came to save. For example, even Abraham had his low points when he put his wife in jeopardy in Egypt and had a son by Sarah’s servant Hagar. David committed adultery with Bathsheba; then he attempted to cover up that sin with the murder of her husband. Solomon began his reign as a type of the Messiah, but ended his reign as a type for the anti-Christ. Solomon’s son Rehoboam caused the division of the kingdom and did “evil above all that were before him” (1 Kgs 14:9).

The reality of Jesus’ flawed ancestry is particularly relevant today because there are so many wounded families. In this sense the tragedy of Arthur’s life reflects the woundedness found in many families. How do we cope with the reality of family members who have gone astray? It is a painful and challenging reality. The answer, I believe, is found in trust - hope. Jesus died on the cross for Arthur just as he did for each of us and each of our family members. Therefore we need to pray with confidence that God’s mercy will ultimately make the difference. It would be a joy if Arthur was to free himself from the slavery of his addiction, but it is essential that he spend eternity in paradise.

Peter Finney, Jr. narrated a wonderful story of God’s mercy in the November 6, 2010 edition of the *Clarion Herald*. James Arrington knew that his alcoholic blackouts, carousing and utter failure to embrace reality was a deadly choice, but he couldn’t break away. He spent six years homeless on the streets of New Orleans. He slept with rats and was arrested 69 times, mostly for public drunkenness and loitering. Arrington’s drinking started during his first year in college, but after he dropped out and entered the Army it exploded.

What followed is an amazing story. He began to use the reading library for homeless people at Immaculate Conception Church and started attending Mass at St. Patrick Church. In January 2004 he went to confession. He said, “I don’t know what I expected, but it was amazing. It was just a beautiful, cleansing experience.” In August of that year he left New Orleans for Austin, Texas. Four months later on December 4, 2004 Arrington began his sobriety. During the Easter vigil 2008, he entered the Catholic Church. The God who writes straight lines with broken and wounded instruments didn’t stop there. Arrington began to hear the Master’s call, “Come follow me.”

He is now in seminary formation looking to his ordination. He declares, "I've certainly seen where our sin can take us and how enslaved we can become to it, no matter what it is." He adds, "My life is now so different than it was then. The gratitude has never gone away. Every night when I go to sleep in a bed, I say, 'Thank you, God, that I'm sleeping in a bed.' Because there were plenty of nights I didn't sleep in a bed."

God's love and mercy allows the grief we suffer over family members to become a confident prayer. Please pray for James Arrington. He hopes to return to New Orleans to celebrate Mass in the same churches where he sought refuge from the streets. Please pray that Arthur will also return home. His two fathers are waiting for him. Let us also pray with confidence for all our broken families: "Jesus, I trust in you!"