

## **Fourth Sunday of Lent C/2007**

Our God is merciful, compassionate and whose love is without limit. All the readings of this Sunday display the grandeur of the heart of God where his love and mercy are bigger than our faults as he unconditionally forgives us.

The first reading reports the entry of the people of Israel in the Promised Land. The wandering in the desert is over; hunger and thirst are also over. Now that the promise has been fulfilled, the Hebrews are in their own Land. They can now enjoy the beauty of the Land; they can celebrate the Passover of the Lord and eat the fruits of the produce of the Land.

But what misfortune Israel experienced to come to the Promised Land? What misadventure and betrayal of God's covenant they knew before they came to enjoy the fulfillment of the promise? And yet, in spite of all that, God did not abandon them; he loved them so much that he forgave them all their sins.

It is this message of forgiveness and pardon that is the main point of today's Gospel, as Jesus is confronted with the unmerciful legalism of the Pharisees and the Scribes. First of all, Jesus conveys a certain image of God who forgives, offers a second chance to those who went wrong all their life long, and makes no discrimination between the good and the bad. That is why he welcomes tax collectors and sinners indifferently and in spite of their bad reputation.

Such an attitude runs counter to the sensitivity of the Pharisees and the scribes. For them, there is no way of maintaining contact with bad guys and public sinners. For Jesus, on the contrary, God his Father loves truly all these sinners; what he wants is just that they change and convert from their sinful situation.

It is from here that the parable takes its start. The youngest son in the parable stands for the sinners, the oldest son for the Pharisees and the scribes who consider themselves as the holy ones, and the father for God. The point of the parable lies in the love and mercy of the father who does not count the wrong his youngest son has done and even makes him a big feast when he comes back. This episode is a real drama that displays on the one hand the discrepancy between human foolishness and God's forgiveness and, on the other hand, God's bounty and human lack of forgiveness.

From the outset, let us imagine a son who claims his share of heritage while his parents are still alive and goes away to squander his money. Humanly speaking, we can say that such a son considers his parents as already dead so that he wants not only to get rid of them, but also to show them that they do not count any more in his life. But it is here that the grandeur of the love of the father becomes evident. Not only does he forgive and welcome the son when he comes back after having lost everything, but he also makes him a big feast.

That is how God acts with us. Like the father who did not prevent the son from making a bad choice for his life, God lets us free to do whatever we want with our life. For that reason, we are responsible for our life and of the misery following it when we make bad decisions. Second. Like the youngest son who experienced hunger and misery after having left the wonderful house of his father, so are we

when we abandon God and go wandering far from his love. Third. If sins keep us far from God, they do not, however, destroy the love he has for us. God is ever ready to forgive us and to accept us when we come back to him with the whole of our heart. Furthermore, whatever bad we have done, God does not exile us in our past, but he offers us a second chance and wants really that we reconcile with him. That is why the father welcomed the youngest son without even asking any question about what he did with his heritage. He did not condemn him for what he did, but rejoiced that he was back home safe and sound.

All this helps understand well the second reading as St Paul says: “We are the ambassadors for Christ; as though God was appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled with God”. Lent is precisely a time of grace to readjust our lives to the reality of God’s kingdom. Let us not miss such an opportunity to make peace with ourselves, with our God and the brothers and sisters. Whatever be your position, whether you consider yourself as “prodigal son” or “the righteous son”, we all need to reconcile, and this is the time to do it.

However, in order to have the whole picture of the parable, it is better to examine also the attitude of the oldest son. The Gospel says that when he heard music and feast offered for his lost brother, he was unhappy and argued with his father. That means that he had never forgiven his brother. But, by harboring grudges and maintaining our indignation as a way of punishing someone for what he has done, are we not harming ourselves? Is not true that no one suffers more from grudges than the one who bears it? That means also that the oldest son has never understood that his fidelity is a great blessing someone can have in his life. Therefore, when some people are lost and come to recover their salvation, we can but rejoice and thank God.

In other words, our faithfulness can never be used to exclude people to approach God as though we are the only ones who deserve to be considered God’s children. In the same way, those who did wrong, or left the church, and return to faith should be welcomed with joy by their brothers and sisters. Between justice based on duty and obligation defended by the oldest son, the best is that of love defended by the father. Justice of love cares for the good each one needs for his recovery and salvation. That is why the father forgives without conditions.

For anyone burned with remorse and guilt for the wrong done in the past, this is a consoling message. For that we need to forgive ourselves first and do our best to make amends by coming back home. The Father who stands there is forgiving and merciful. Let us trust him and reconcile with him. May this time of Lent help us to do that! May God bless each one of you in a particular way according to your needs before him!

**Joshua 5, 9a. 10-12; 2 Corinthians 5, 17-21; Luke 15, 1-3. 11-32**



Homily Date: March 18, 2007

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Document Name: 20070318homily.pdf