

Fourth Sunday of Lent C/2016

The readings of this fourth Sunday of Lent talk about the mercy of God. They show that God is compassionate and forgiving. They invite us to entrust our lives to the mercy of God and repent of our sins.

The first reading describes the entry of the people of Israel into the Promised Land. It starts with the expression of the mercy of God as he liberates his people from Egypt. It shows how the Israelites celebrated their first Passover and ate the first produce of the land.

What is behind this text is the idea that whatever might be the suffering of his people, God is capable of putting an end to it. There is also the idea that where God sets free, there follows a blessing.

This text helps us understand the stakes of today's Gospel as Jesus speaks of the mercy of God through the parable of the prodigal son. The Gospel starts with the complaint of the Pharisees and the Scribes over Jesus' openness in welcoming tax collectors and sinners in his circle.

It speaks of the response Jesus gave under the form of the parable of the two brothers or, as usually called, the parable of the prodigal son. Then, it enters into details in explaining the whole story about the two brothers and their dad.

It states, first, what happened to the youngest son, by showing how he asked his father to give him his share of estate and went away. It shows also that after having squandered his inheritance abroad with prostitutes, because of the situation of misery in which he found himself, he decided to go back home. Then, the Gospel describes his return and the attitude of his father who, without judging him, welcomed him with open arms and even had a celebration for him.

After that, the Gospel describes the attitude of the oldest son who, taken by anger because of what his brother had done, did not appreciate the feast organized for him or wanted to celebrate his return. The Gospel ends by describing the way the father, in his mercy, tried to persuade his oldest son to accept the return of his brother and to celebrate him.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today, I want to talk about God's mercy and human justice. Let me start with an example of life. Suppose that we are in a tribunal and a young man who has committed a crime is brought into the presence of judges for the hearing. Let us suppose also that in that tribunal, his parents and relatives have come to hear the hearing.

I believe that the attitude of the judges and that of parents will be different. In fact, the judges will consider strictly the law and decide with regard to it if he is guilty or not of the crime committed. The parents, on the contrary, though convinced of the crime of their son, will be looking for the extenuating circumstance which can help their son reduce his guilt.

These two attitudes symbolize God's way of looking at us and the human way of judging. In fact, in the parable, the father is not concerned by the fact that his son was a

bad boy who went away and squandered his money. His real concern is about the wellbeing of his son. That is why he welcomes him with joy and makes a feast for him, because he was lost and now is found. That is how God treats us. He does not lock us in our faults and sins. He rejoices when we come back to him and decide to reconcile with him.

In other words, the youngest son might have violated the law and done bad things. But, that is not the most important. The most important is that now he has decided to come back home; he has recognized his bad deeds and wants to belong again to his father's house. In that perspective, how could his father refuse him the second chance and especially now that he is resolute in changing his life?

As we can see, what Jesus wants to tell us is that God is a Father who truly loves the sinners that we are; what he wants is just that we change and repent from our sinful situation. For that reason, he forgives anyone of those who repent and wants to reconcile with him.

From this vision, let us draw some consequences. First, 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. For that reason, God is ever ready to forgive us whenever we come back to him with the whole of our heart.

However, unlike God, human beings are so harsh with their fellows. They look only at the law. They want that the law might be applied at any cost even when someone has given evident signs of changing his life. That is the attitude of the oldest son.

Dwelling in legality, he refuses to enter the celebration's hall. Of course, he has valid arguments, because of his faithfulness to his father. But, what he does not see is that his brother has become wiser than before; he has changed. Moreover, he has never understood that his fidelity is a great blessing someone can have in his life. 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.

That is why I believe that between justice based simply on duty and obligation, which is defended by the oldest son, in this Holy Year of Mercy, we have to opt for the justice of love defended by the father. Justice of love cares for the good each one needs for his recovery and salvation. At the same time, I believe that for anyone burned with remorse and guilt for the wrong done in the past, this is a consoling message. May Lent help us to change and come back home! God bless you all!

Joshua 5: 9a, 10-12; 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21; Luke 15: 1-32



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Contact: www.mbala.org

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