

Fourth Sunday of Lent C/2022

In the tradition of the Church, this Sunday is called “Laetare Sunday” meaning the Sunday of joy, perhaps because Easter comes close. Another reason perhaps might be because we’re dealing with a compassionate and forgiving God. That’s why today’s readings invite us to rejoice in 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 recall of the mercy of God as he set his people free 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 can put an end to it. Another idea is that where God sets free, there blessings follow.

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

It speaks of Jesus’ response 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 father.

It states, first, what happened to the youngest son as he took his share of estate from his father and went away. It shows also how after having squandered his inheritance abroad with prostitutes, struck by famine, 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 the joy of coming back home. Let me start with a reminder of what a parable is: A parable is a way of speaking by using images in order to tell a truth about the Kingdom of God.

What is the context of this parable? It is Pharisees and Scribes’ criticism of Jesus for his welcoming of Tax collectors and sinners. Because a parable uses images, let us explain the symbolism in it: the father symbolizes God who is merciful toward sinners; the youngest son symbolizes the sinners and the unforgiving elder son represents the self-righteous Pharisees and Scribes.

Now, let us enter into the details of the parable: Jesus is confronted with the unmerciful legalism of the Pharisees and the Scribes. They consider themselves as just and saints who have nothing to do with the others they consider as heretics and no catholic. Even today such legalism exists: the criticism of others as unorthodox, heretics and sinners.

Against all that, Jesus conveys the message of Divine mercy, of a God who is a father who forgives and offers a second chance to those who went wrong all their life long. That is why he welcomes indifferently tax collectors and sinners in spite of their bad reputation. For sure, such an attitude runs counter to the sensitivity of the Pharisees and the scribes for whom there is no way of maintaining any contact with bad guys and public sinners.

For Jesus, on the contrary, his Father loves truly all these sinners. He needs just one thing: that they change and repent of their sin. For that reason, the father does not count the wrong his youngest son has done and even offers him a big feast when he comes back.

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 for 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 offers 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 for the misery following it when we make bad decisions. Every act of freedom has a price, in good sense or bad sense.

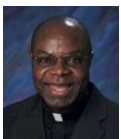
Like the youngest son who experienced hunger and misery after having left the wonderful house of his father, so are we when we abandon God and go wandering far from his love. If sins keep us far from God, however, they do not destroy the love he has for us. God is ever ready to forgive us and accept us when we come back to him with the whole of our heart. In other words, whatever bad we have done, God does not exile us in our past, but he offers us a second chance so 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.

Let us talk also about the attitude of the oldest son. The Gospel says that when he heard music and feast offered for his brother, he was unhappy and argued with his father. What this episode means is that he had never forgiven his brother. By harboring grudges and maintaining our indignation as a way of punishing someone for what he has done, we just harm ourselves. The one who bears grudges is the one who suffers and not the other way around. It means also that the oldest son has never understood that his fidelity to his father 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. In the same way, those who did wrong, or left the church, and return to God have to know that God loves them and their place is always there, in the church.

As St Paul proclaimed, this is the time of reconciliation. Lent is a time of the grace of a second chance. Let us not miss such an opportunity to make peace with ourselves, God and our 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. God bless you all!

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



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