



Fourth Sunday of Lent March 10, 2013 C

GOD'S MERCY

Traditionally known as *Laetare Sunday*, the Fourth Sunday of Lent marks the midpoint in the Lenten preparation for the Resurrection feast. Appropriately, each of the three readings characterizes one of the many facets of *Easter joy*. In the *first reading* from Joshua, the people of God are portrayed as celebrating for the first time the feast of their freedom in their own land; the joy is one of promises fulfilled. In the *second text* from Paul, the apostle joyfully proclaims the effects of Jesus' saving act, i.e., the reconciliation of all people to the Father. In the *Gospel*, the joy is that of "coming home" and rediscovering a father's forgiving and gratuitous love. Although Lent is a season of penance, it must be marked by the joyful enthusiasm and confidence today's reading communicates.

Guilt is never easy to admit, but when the guilty one knows that a loving Father with open arms waits to welcome him/her home, the road to repentance becomes easier and shorter (Luke). Repentance can be thought of as the only worthy response to the wondrous gift of reconciliation wrought by God in Christ (2Corinthians). Such a gift of freedom and life should be celebrated often and joyfully (Joshua).

The story Dostoyevsky wanted read to him as he lay dying

When Dostoyevsky, the Russian novelist, knew that he had but a little time to live, he made his children come into his room, and begged their mother to read the parable of the Prodigal Son. He listened with his eyes closed, absorbed in his thoughts. "My children," he said in his feeble voice, "never forget what you have just heard. Have absolute faith in God, and never despair of his pardon. I love you dearly, but my love is nothing compared with the love of God for all those he has created. Even if you should be so unhappy as to commit a crime in the course of your life, never despair of God. You are his children; humble yourselves before him as before your father, implore his pardon, and he will rejoice over your repentance, as the father rejoiced over that of the Prodigal Son."

Coming home to the loving arms of God

A big piece of today's story is of course the prodigal son experiencing his father's welcome home. Patricia Sanchez

offers the following beautiful reflection on today's Gospel.

Have you ever had the experience, while traveling, or arriving at your destination only to find that there is no one there to meet you? As you disembark the plane and make your way into the terminal, how does it feel to search the sea of expectant faces and fail to find a familiar smile, an outstretched hand or open arms? When this happens, the journey seems longer, the joy of arrival is dampened and the loneliness of the weary traveler intensifies.

Perhaps we can use that experience and the feelings associated with it to help us appreciate that we spend all our lives journeying home to a God who will not be late or become caught in traffic or have a flat tire or ever forget that we are en route. On the contrary, our God awaits us eagerly and despite our sins and the alienation these have caused, our God sees us "while we are still a long way off." On the off chance that we may not see our God coming towards us, provisions have been made for huge billboards to alert us to the divine presence and salvific intent.

One reads: "There will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

Another says: "Come, eat of my food and drink of my wine" (Proverbs 9:5).

With each billboard comes the ever deepening realization that our God loves and welcomes sinners home, home to peace, home to arms opened wide in love, home to reconciliation.

Deeply moved at the sight of us coming home in need of forgiveness, our God throws propriety to the wind and snatches up a "flowing robe" so as to run more quickly. Our God grabs us before we can speak our sins and sorrow and embraces us with a love that forgives, affirms and reinstates the relationship that we have broken. This loving forgiveness is poignantly illustrated in today's Gospel, the uniquely Lucan parable of the prodigal come home. This parable was the Lucan Jesus' noble attempt at assuring sinners that whenever we decide to turn our footsteps homeward to God, we will be met with open arms.

The Resentful Older Brother

The older brother is anything but ready to join in the party and share in the father's joy. Instead, he becomes "angry and refuses to enter the house." He despises his younger, wayward brother and is mad with his father for killing the fatted calf in his brother's honor. Those of us who have

been dutiful sons (or daughters) probably identify very much with the feelings of the older brother. Yes, we might say "Let the brother return home, but to bread and water, not to a fatted calf; in sack cloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing. We may wonder if the party has cancelled out the seriousness of sin and repentance?"

Scholars commenting on this part of the parable point out that the older son also left his father's house in an emotional and spiritual way. The father loves *both* of his sons equally but, unfortunately, the older son has never *felt* appreciated. While he is a dutiful son, over the years he has become cold-hearted and judgmental. He even disowns his little brother. He refers to him as "*that son of yours.*" He is unable to share in his father's joy at the return of his younger son. So both sons are wayward in their own way. Both have a broken relationship with their father. The older son has become a foreigner in his own home. Resentment now pervades his whole being. Notice how the father also reaches out to the older brother. He *goes out* to talk to him. He loves him just as much as he loves his younger son. But sadly, the older son, lost in resentment, is unable to *receive* his father's love. Resentment and joy cannot co-exist. Resentment will always steal our joy. Henri Nouwen writes: *The father wants not only his younger son back, but his elder son as well. But will the son respond to his father's plea or remain stuck in bitterness? This is not a story that separates the two brothers into the good one and the evil one. The father only is good. He loves both sons. He wants both to participate in his joy. "All I have is yours," he says. Thus the father's unreserved, unlimited love is offered wholly and equally. He does not compare the two sons. He expresses complete love according to their individual journeys.*

In the parable, the older brother symbolizes the Pharisees and Scribes who kept the law but their hearts were not with God. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus says of them, "*These people serve me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*" As one writer puts it, "*they were lawless within the law.*" Like the older brother, they are not happy when the tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners turn to Jesus. They are a lot like Jonah who hated to see the Ninevites repent and thereby gain God's mercy. From the angle of the older brother, the real target of the parable is not the wayward sinners and their forgiveness by God but the self-righteous "saints" who begrudged God's mercy to others.

When Luke was writing his Gospel 30 or 40 years later, the older brother symbolized those Church leaders who did not want to receive back those who had lapsed during the persecution.

Yes, God loves the sinner but he also expects change and conversion

Today's parable could somehow convey an image of a God who is soft on sin. We may wonder if the father is too lenient with a son who has committed a terrible sin against him. Any of us could easily be tempted to stray if mercy were so easily had. So let's look a little deeper. The following piece is by Fr. Paul Waddel, C.P., Professor of Ethics at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.

Yes, indeed, the father is exultant that his son who was dead has come back to life but it is also clear that he expects his son to leave his dissolute lifestyle behind. The son is welcomed home, but he is also expected to change, just as at Baptism, when every neophyte (new born) Christian is clothed in Christ, not only that he/she might begin a new life of peace, truthfulness, justice and joy, but also that they may renounce a contrary life that is darkness, division, falsehood and gloom. The clothing of the prodigal son in the finest robe indicates not only a fresh start but also a break with destructive past. The father welcomes his son home not so that he can repeat the past, but that he can reconstruct the future in hope. The father's wonderful show of mercy must be met by the son's commitment to letting go his past and beginning to learn anew what it means to be a son. A son who is a drug addict is forgiven by his parents. But when he returns home he is expected to reform life and do the painful work of freeing his life from drugs.

Reflection question: In the parable, which son do we more identify with? Why?

Have a blessed week,

Le Paron