

## **Fourth Sunday of Lent March 06, 2016**

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

God's love is universal and at the same time it is personal. Our God is concerned of each person individually yet at the same time he loves us as a community. We exist in and through him and particularly so because he is the God who loved the world so much to send his own Son to gather us together that we may have new life in him. God also sends us to carry his divine love into the world and give the message of the newness of life and light. We are children of the light baptized into the glory that is Christ. We are initiated into the life of Christ who is the light of the world. Once baptized in Christ we become his new creation, the members of God's own family. On this fourth Sunday of Lent, when the Church already rejoices in the coming feast of Easter, singing "Laetare Jerusalem", "Rejoice, O Jerusalem", it is the Gospel of the return of the prodigal son that is proposed to us as today's reading. And this is indeed a Gospel of joy and peace, for it concerns a truly profound and lasting conversion: that of a son who returns to his father and throws himself at his feet, asking for his forgiveness for having squandered his entire inheritance. Here we are called upon to renew ourselves and experience the loving invitation of our Lord. In the early church those candidates to be baptized and public sinners were called upon to understand that Jesus alone is the new life.

The theme that pervades through today's readings is that Jesus Christ is the sign of joy and makes everything new. God tells us that everything old has passed away and will pass away and we have the new creation. This is our initiation into the life of Christ. Once we are baptised in Christ we become his new creation, the members of God's own family. Today as we enter the fourth Sunday of Lent we are called upon to renew ourselves and experience the loving invitation of our Lord to be renewed in him. Those to be baptised and public sinners were called upon to understand this new life. There is a great search for happiness and fulfilment in life here and now. This search for happiness and fulfilment is symbolized by the image of the younger son in our gospel parable of today who went away with all his wealth in search of happiness. The only problem was that he thought he could find happiness in what the parable calls a life of debauchery. We would say now he tried to find happiness by satisfying every desire of his, no matter whether moral or immoral. But he did not know that the true happiness is not to be found within one's own self, in our own hearts. The Israel received the happiness as they ate the produce of the land, the fruit of their hard work in the Promised Land. St Paul tells us that we find that happiness in Christ who makes all things new.

The First Reading tells us that the Israel had reached the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. Their arrival was made possible by a miracle of the Lord. Just as the sea opened up for them as they escaped Egypt, so the waters of the Jordan opened up before them so they could cross the Canaan. They encamp on the plains of Jericho and they discover that with God's help no earthly obstacles can stand in their way. A relatively brief journey became a journey of forty years as the people of Israel failed to trust God. Now God tells Joshua that the slavery of Egypt and the reproach of being serfs under a pagan dominance are removed at last. The Israelites now can live freely in their own country. However the faithless people had no entry into the new land. The reading tells us that they happily ate the produce of the land. The manna which was their food for forty years ceased to come from heaven and they had the new produce of the land for themselves. The people could now enjoy the abundance of the Promised Land. God had tested them and had made all things new for them. God tells them that on this day he has taken away from them the disgrace of Egypt. They could now celebrate their new life in the Passover that recalls the beginning of their journey.

In the Second Reading St Paul tells the Corinthians that if anyone is in Christ, there is already new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! Paul tells them that everything is from God, who reconciled them to himself through Christ, and have given them the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their infidelity against God, and giving them the grace of reconciliation. Jesus is the mediator in the process and our part is to accept God's gift of Reconciliation. But such a call imposes a sense of responsibility on them. Hence forth they are to be the ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through them. He asks them to become the righteousness of God in Christ. He invites them to remember that God for our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Christ all might become the righteousness of God. In other words, our sins are forgiven and we share the very holiness of God.

In today's gospel we have the story of the Prodigal son which presents us with an overwhelming picture of God who is all loving, all caring and all forgiving. This is the family story of the Prodigal Son, generally understood as the greatest short story in the world. The context of today's parable is very important. The Scribes and Pharisees, who considered themselves as followers of the law and self righteous, grumble at Jesus that he is the friend of sinners and tax collectors and eats with them. Jesus does not confront them directly but tells the story about a

father who has two sons. Here both are seemingly lost since one has squandered the property and the other refused to love his brother. The central focus of the Parable, however, remains on the Father throughout the story. The sons are also important but in a different way. At the beginning of the story we see that the younger son is the bad boy, very much similar to the tax collectors and sinners who are listening to him. The elder son, the good boy, matches up well with the Scribes and the Pharisees who are also in his audience. What unites the story and makes it powerful is the abundance of love the father shows towards both his sons.

But by the end of the story we see that both of them in different ways prove themselves to be obstacles to the family unity and harmony which the father desired more than anything. That younger son reminds us of the struggle that takes place in the society at this time to be successful. He convinces his father to give him his share of the inheritance and squanders the whole thing in a totally irresponsible way of living. He shames his father and the family name. He degrades himself by living in a gentile country and working for a gentile employer. This son is not dumb and he knows that if he has to survive he must do something to change his life. Therefore he makes a plan to return to the father not as a son but as an employee, hoping for some work, food and shelter. This is the interior change and the repentance. He is also aware that such plan may not work since he has disgraced the family and the father may disown him. But on his return there is a surprise for him when the Father receives him back and restores him back to his former dignity of a son. Perhaps in the present day situation when we look for a change and new life we visualise ourselves to be like the younger son living with the pigs in need of returning to our Father. There in such situation we have someone waiting for us with open arms to welcome us and receive us. There is always the hope and restoration of the dignity of man.

The elder son despises his younger brother for leaving and his father for accepting him back. He is now seen as an angry and hostile person. However, again the father breaks the social custom and pleads with the elder son to come in and join the celebration. This is not just being polite. The father truly wants his elder son there because he truly loves him. The elder son is not able to understand this and the story does not tell us whether he really went to the celebration. But the story tells us that the father loved both the sons beyond every possible human level and broke all cultural boundaries. He gave one the property which was due to him only after his death and he pleaded the elder son to forget his anger and return to him. He does not care what the society will say of him. He just goes out to love and accept his sons. This is the love proclaimed by God for us in Jesus who will ever

be ready to forgive us. God is a Father who is full of tenderness and who wants to save all the men and women that he created in his Love. But this grace of salvation is given by God at the proper time, in his own time.

In fact the entire problem began with the younger son. Without waiting for his father to die he asks for his share of the inheritance. Normally the property was divided only after the death of the father. Then he abandons his duties and responsibilities in the family estate and goes abroad to live a life of fun. His reckless lifestyle drains his fortunes and he finds himself reduced to abject poverty and misery. Once abandoned by his friends, a Jewish prince like him should condescend to feeding pigs, which Jews regard as unclean animal, shows the depths of degradation in which he finds himself. A life away from the divine quickly enough leads people to a situation where they lose all sense of shame and decency. But no matter how far sinners move away from the father's house, the loving heart of the father always follows them, gently whispering in their ears, "Come home! I want you. I am waiting for you." The Prodigal son decides exactly that when all is lost and chooses to go back to the Father.

In the parable we are given a most beautiful description of our heavenly Father. He is outside of the house waiting for the younger son to return. He is certain that he will return to him. When he does return his father ran to him, clasps him in his arms and kisses him tenderly and he brings him in and throws a party for him. When we return to God he throws a party for us too. Not only does he come out of the house once when he sees his older son angry, but he comes out a second time to try to persuade him to come into the house. In the same way our heavenly Father comes out to welcome each of us to his party. The most beautiful line in the parable is what the father says to the elder son, "all I have is yours". Our heavenly Father says also to us, "All I have is yours". This is a most beautiful promise and stunning invitation. We are not told at the end of the parable whether or not the elder son went in to the party. After reading this parable we also have a choice to make, whether to stay outside or to go in to enjoy the Father's party. But the best offer of happiness is from God our Father, "all I have is yours".

The prodigal son did not get the full opportunity to fully express to his father that he would become a paid servant. The Father immediately readmits him as the part of the family and gives the order to bring the robe, the ring, and the sandals and to kill the fatted calf for a celebration. The younger son in reality had a warped notion of his father's forgiveness. He had no understanding of what mercy really means. But now he had just learnt the depth of the love of the Father. The elder son also

did not know what forgiveness and love meant. He did not and could not forgive his younger brother for his misdeeds. In this parable Jesus teaches us the depth of the generosity of God and his mercy. God our heavenly Father is always waiting at the door waiting for us to come to him. At every Mass we receive the same invitation from Jesus, to share his body and blood and hence his forgiveness. The younger son needed to turn back from his frivolous lifestyle and return to the father's house and be a responsible and obedient son. In our life we often regret that the other is more privileged and gets more benefits than us. Often we are hurt and indignant like the elder brother in the parable. We indeed have missed the point. It is not about who is more or less deserving in a given situation. It is our ability to love unconditionally and to believe in the basic dignity and equality of all people.

The parable of the prodigal son indicates, however, that we do have the opportunity to make a change; we do not have to stay in our hopeless state; we can come to ourselves. The lost son realized that in his father's house there was sustenance for him; he humbled himself, willing, if necessary, to be his father's servant, and started back home. This turning in our lives is the first indication of God's love for us. This parable makes it obvious that God is at work. That he is able to see the younger son when he was still a long way off means that the father has been watching for his son, waiting for him, longing for him. The father runs to him, embraces him, loves him and gives him gifts; he seems totally oblivious to the fact that his son has disrespected him, acted outrageously, and lost everything. The father lavishes upon him, celebrates over him. This is a wonderful picture of the great love of God towards us. He seeks after us, reaches out to us. When we come to Him, He washes away all our evil deeds of the past, not holding them against us. The road back to God is sometimes long, and often difficult. But while we are still far away from God, if there is already in our soul a small spark which, through grace, sets aflame the love of God in us, then our Heavenly Father sees it immediately and, with his tender care, helps us to continue on our journey, as he waits eagerly for our return.

A pastor heard that one of his parishioners was going about announcing to everyone that he would no longer attend church services. This rebellious parishioner was advancing the familiar argument that he could communicate with God just as easily out in the fields with nature as his setting for worship. One winter evening, the pastor called on him for a friendly visit. The two men sat before the fireplace making small talk, but studiously avoiding the issue of church attendance. After a while, the pastor took the tongs from the rack next to the

fireplace and pulled a single coal from the fire. He placed the glowing ember on the hearth. As the two watched in silence, the coal quickly ceased burning and turned an ashen gray, while the other coals in the fire continued to burn brightly. The pastor's silent message was not lost on the parishioner. After a long pause, he turned to the pastor and said "I'll be back at services next Sunday."

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India