

## **4th Sunday of Lent C; Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Cor 5:17- 21; Lk 15: 1-3.11-32**

God's mercy for sinners is the clear theme that runs through the three readings of today's Mass. In our first reading, we have the beautiful words spoken by God to his people "I have taken the shame of Egypt away from you". The second reading stresses how God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, not holding our faults against us. The Gospel is even more dramatic: The forgiveness of the prodigal son mirrors God's love and his ever ready forgiveness of our wrongdoings.

The parable of the prodigal son appears to be the most known and most quoted of all Jesus' parables. It is most apt for the season of Lent and especially for this year of mercy. The great Indian legend, Mahatma Gandhi tells how when he was fifteen, he stole a piece of gold from his brother. However, he felt so bad about it that he made up his mind to confess it to his father. He wrote out his sin on a piece of paper asking for forgiveness and punishment, while promising never to sin again. At that time, his father was in bed sick. Gandhi handed him the note and sat beside him in bed waiting for his judgment. His father sat up in bed and began to read the note. As he read, tears came into his eyes. Gandhi himself also began to cry. Instead of getting angry and punishing him, the loving father hugged his repentant son and that was the end of the whole matter. The experience of being loved while he was in sin had a profound effect on Gandhi. He reflected that only the person who has experienced this kind of love knows how it feels. This is the kind of love that the prodigal son in our Gospel text experienced when he came back to his father.

Psychologists tell us that the deepest fear in children expresses itself in what is technically known as "separation anxiety". This is the fear in children of being abandoned or left alone by their parents, that's why children like to cling to either or both of their parents, nannies or baby sitters. Children are afraid that the love which brought them into the world and which gave them security and assurance will be withdrawn or suspended and they will become helpless. Separation anxiety is the fear of living in the absence of familiar love, of having no place to belong to, of being left at a lost property office, unlooked for and unclaimed. This sort of fear is not limited to children alone. Our struggle in time is always for relevance, love, appreciation and authenticity. We do not want anyone to write us off. This is part of our daily baggage. The attitude of writing people off is the point at issue in today's gospel. The Pharisees readily write the so called sinners off. They had no patience with them and marvel at how Christ dines with them. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to allow sinners to stay permanently lost. Jesus sees the sinner and the lost as beloved children of the father who needs love and care and understanding. Jesus told the beautiful story of the prodigal son to illustrate

this point. You may have noticed that it was deprivation, hunger and poverty that sharpens the prodigal son's sense of belonging and community. Hunger sharpens one's sense of belonging immensely. When we look at ourselves, there are often the three parts of each of the characters in us: There is the father in us which has a keen eye for the lost, great empathy for the needy and widening heart filled with love and ready to forgive always. There is also the younger son, the prodigal son in us which wants to grab we can and try everything we shouldn't. We want to have everything to ourselves. As long as our needs are well taken care of, any other thing can follow. There is the part of the elder brother in us which makes everybody pay for our loveless fidelity. All three combine to shape our lives.

The Church presents the sacrament of reconciliation or confession to us as a means of healing and an opportunity for a fresh start in our efforts to be good or to live a holy life. Unfortunately, many of us no longer make use of this beautiful sacrament. As Scott Peck wrote in his classic book of several decades ago, we are a people of the lie. We live in lying to ourselves by telling ourselves that sin doesn't exist, that we have done no wrong, that everybody's "doing it" and so it is okay. "God will understand," we tell ourselves, and thus absolve ourselves from the need to admit anything to Him or to go to confession. That's called denial — and it's holding far too many folks these days in its seductive and addictive grip. Consequently, they live trapped lives far removed from that which will give their souls the food for which they hunger and the strength that they can derive from it to live lives in genuine freedom.

The parable of the prodigal son distills and sums up the whole gospel message. It tells us all about the vagrant, wandering, vulnerable and wounded human heart that is in us all. Paul Tillich [The Shaking of the Foundations, Charles Scribner, New York], sees grace as the only panacea to our wounded-ness. In his own words:

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pains and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk in the dark valleys of meaninglessness and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, one which we loved or from which we are estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure has become intolerable to us. It strikes us when year after year, the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroy all our joy and courage. Sometimes, a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as if the voice were saying "you are accepted" ...."

Can we please sing together the great song put together by John Newton and which tells his own conversion experience, Amazing Grace.

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