

TURNAROUND TOWARDS PRODIGAL FATHERS

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Year C – March 31, 2019

Readings: Jos 5:9a, 10-12; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

“I will get up and go to my father and say to him: ‘Father, I have sinned ...’.” (Lk)

Three Scriptural Signposts

1. The popular ‘parable of the prodigal son’ is perhaps better understood by keeping the loving and forgiving father, not the son, at the centre. Prodigality refers to lavishness, extravagance, wastefulness. Isn’t the father’s love lavish, extravagant, wasteful? When the shameless son drags his father and family into the muck by sinning gravely through debauchery and self-indulgence, instead of disowning him and kicking him out of the house, the father embraces him, kisses him, restores him to sonship and celebrates with a banquet? Doesn’t the father seem a little crazy? That’s precisely the point of the story: there is no limit and no logic in God’s love, mercy and compassion for sinners. Some details are worth noting. First, the gospel parable begins with an accusatory Pharisaic prologue: “This man,” the Pharisees grumble, “welcomes sinners and eats with them.” It is this remark that prompts Jesus to narrate his powerful parable about ourselves (either if we consider ourselves sinners, like the younger son, or as holier-than-thou hypocrites, like the elder). Second, there are two movements in the parable: a going astray till one hits rock-bottom, followed by a turnaround [*metanoia*] or a ‘re-turn’ leading to new life and joy. Third, in Jewish society, family inheritance was never divided unless the head of the family died. By telling his father: “Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me,” the younger son was almost telling his dad, “Dad, you are dead; you do not exist for me!”
2. The downward descent of the younger son is reflected in his cutting off of ties progressively—first, from family; second, from fair-weather friends; third, from human society since he is forced to live with pigs. But he truly hits rock-bottom when pigs—the most abominable of animals in Jewish reckoning—seem to be eating better than him! This is when he realizes that he has descended even lower than the servants in his father’s house. “He came to himself” (v.17) is the moment of self-realization—very different from self-centered ego-inflation when he left home. “I will get up and go” (v.18) is the point of ‘*re-turn*’, a turnaround, when he sees things in right perspective and decides to re-connect with his father, his brother and human society, at large. Most touching in the parable is the stance of the prodigal father who seems to be looking with longing down the road which his son had taken to squander his hard-earned money; for now, “While he [son] was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran ...” The father does not allow him to complete his ‘act of contrition’, so to say, but orders for the robe, ring and sandals—all signs of restoration and renewal. Let the party begin!
3. Every Sunday, there is normally quite an obvious link between the first reading and the gospel passage. However, this Sunday, it might be easier to connect the second reading with the gospel since in these verses of Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians, Paul stresses that “if anyone is in Christ, s/he is a new creation” (5:17). He then traces the trajectory of reconciliation originating in God [Abba, Father] since: “All this is *from God*, who

reconciled us to himself *through Christ* and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (v.18). In keeping with the prodigality of the father in the parable, here too, one sees the prodigality and extravagance of God, the heavenly Father, who, “For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to *be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (v.21). Jesus, ‘*becomes sin*’, so to say, so that we might be reconciled to God. We see dimly the correspondence between the father in the parable who is loving, merciful and compassionate and our Father in Paradise who is also loving, merciful, forgiving and compassionate. Thus, you and I must feel the need for repentance—the *metanoia*, or turnaround from sin towards salvation—in order that we might be the ‘new creation’ in, for, and through Christ.

Linking the 1st Reading with the Theme of God’s Mercy

The context of this reading is the celebration of the Passover under the leadership of Joshua—Moses’ successor—with an air of joyful celebration. God’s says: “I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you,” reminding his people that they are no longer slaves but free people. The Passover for the Israelites—and, in our case, the Paschal mystery of Christ—always stands as reminder of movement from slavery to freedom, from death to life, and from sin to salvation.

The psalm (34) extols God’s goodness: “Taste and see the Lord is good” for “I sought the Lord and he answered me. This poor man called, the Lord heard him and rescued him from his distress.”

Three Texts from Catholic Tradition

St. Cyril of Alexandria [378-444]: “It is our duty, therefore, to conform ourselves to that which God wills: for He heals those who are sick; He raises those who are fallen; He gives a helping hand to those who have stumbled; He brings back him who has wandered ... [Unlike the elder son], let us rejoice: let us, in company with the holy angels, praise Him as being good, and loving unto all people; as gentle, and not remembering evil. For if such is our state of mind, Christ will receive us, by Whom and with Whom, to God the Father be praise and dominion with the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever, Amen.”

St. John Paul II in *Dives in Misericordia* (1980): “In the parable of the prodigal son, the term ‘justice’ is not used even once; just as in the original text the term ‘mercy’ is not used either. Nevertheless, the relationship between justice and love, that is manifested as mercy, is inscribed with great exactness in the content of the Gospel parable. It becomes more evident that love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice—precise, and often too narrow.”

Pope Francis in *Misericordiae Vultus*, n.17: “Every confessor must accept the faithful as the father in this parable: a father who runs out to meet his son despite the fact that he has squandered away his inheritance. Confessors are called to embrace the repentant son who comes back home and to express the joy of having him back again. Let us never tire of also going out to the other son who stands outside, incapable of rejoicing, in order to explain to him that his judgement is severe, unjust and meaningless in light of the father’s boundless mercy.”

In Lighter Vein: After explaining the parable of the prodigal son to her Sunday school kids, a teacher asked them: “Who suffered the most in the story?” A child answered, “The fatted calf!”
