

31st March 2019 (Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C)

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 33(34):2-7; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3,11-32.

You are with me always, all I have is yours!

God is forever merciful; but what is my attitude towards God? The Pharisees and the scribes often criticise Jesus because he welcomes and eats with public sinners. Jesus wants to witness to the infinite mercy and forgiveness of the Father. Jesus teaches that there is no reason for sinners to be afraid, God is always willing to welcome them back.

To drive this point home Jesus delivers three beautiful parables that speak about things lost and found, and celebrated. This trilogy of parables speaks of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost sons. In today's gospel we read the last of these parables.

At different moments of the parable we are invited to focus on different actors in the drama; the younger son, the father and the older son. Each person has a story to narrate. (Unfortunately, true to the culture of the time, this story is about three men; no women enter the scene!)

We perhaps sympathise with the younger son who, at his first chance, claims his share of the family's property and runs off to enjoy life. Had he stayed home he would have to continue working and managing the farm which, even if very fruitful, requires constant energy and attention. Instead he goes away and enjoys life. Unfortunately for him, when he runs out of money, the city he is in goes through a severe famine, and he ends up doing the most disgusting job a Jew could ever consider, feeding pigs. The young adult is so hungry that he even wants to share in the pigs' meals!

While a Jewish audience would have been disgusted to learn of the plight of the young man, no sin is too great for the ever-merciful father (God) who is waiting for his son's return. The father sees the son even when he is still a long way away, runs up to him, throws himself on his neck in a deep compassionate embrace, and fully reinstates him to his former glory, dressing him in a robe, ring and sandals. The festive banquet follows. The father is not even interested to know where the son has been during his absence, as long as he has returned to him safe and sound.

Jesus wants us to focus on the older son. Unlike the wayward younger son, '*Senior*' has always been faithful to his father. He does not leave home, never disobeys the Father (God) and does not entertain his friends in extravagant meals. *Senior* is extremely reliable and the father trusts him with the running and management of the property. Yet we now realise that while the father has been anxiously waiting for the younger son's return, the *Senior* has distanced himself from his brother and perhaps secretly hoped never ever to hear about him again! He is greatly surprised when, returning home from working on the property, a young servant boy informs him that his brother is back safe and sound, and that his Father has invited the whole neighbourhood for a welcome-home banquet.

While we can easily recognise the sin of the younger son, it is more difficult to understand the sin of the older one. After all, unlike his younger brother, he has always respected the Father (God), who never even bothered offering his older son even a young goat to celebrate with his friends! One wonders about the relationship between the older son and his Father. Does the older son understand his Father's love and concern? While the younger son spent his share of the property, the older son spent his time greedily guarding his share. The Father (God) is over the moon because his son is back, the older brother could not even bear the sight of him, and is even angry at the Father's behaviour.

In reflecting on this parable, Jesus wants us to respond to a hidden question: who do I identify with in this story? Am I like the generous, welcoming and forgiving Father (God), or do I behave like the older son who offends his Father by not accepting his brother back? Am I more willing to judge the sins of my sisters and brothers, or do I recognise my own sins and recognise my need to partake in the Father's mercy. After all, I too am invited to share in the fullness of the Father's life.

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