

LIVING THE GOSPEL

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Mar 14, 2010

earth are reconciled,(Cf. Isa 45:8; Ps 85:12) for the Son alone "descended from heaven" and causes us to ascend there with him, by his Cross, Resurrection, and Ascension.(Jn 3:13; 12:32; 14 2-3; 16:28; 20:17; Eph 4:9-10; Heb 1:3; 2:13)

2839 With bold confidence, we began praying to our Father. In begging him that his name be hallowed, we were in fact asking him that we ourselves might be always made more holy. But though we are clothed with the baptismal garment, we do not cease to sin, to turn away from God. Now, in this new petition, we return to him like the prodigal son and, like the tax collector, recognize that we are sinners before him.(Cf. Lk 15:11-32, 18:13) Our petition begins with a "confession" of our wretchedness and his mercy. Our hope is firm because, in his Son, "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."(Col 1:14; Eph 1:7) We find the efficacious and undoubted sign of his forgiveness in the sacraments of his Church.(Cf. Mt 26:28; Jn 20:23)

Sharing and Discussion

1. Which son best illustrates your journey?
2. How do we, who are Catholic Christians, avoid embracing and communicating an attitude similar to that of the elder brother?
3. What does this passage teach us about our Heavenly Father? About reconciliation?

Closing Prayer

All: God of joy, you overlook our weakness and invite us to share in your everlasting feast. May we always turn toward you and be open to your transforming offer of mercy and forgiveness. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader: May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil and bring us to everlasting life.

All: Amen

Saturday 10am - 12pm at Church of The Holy Cross (room #03-06)

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Theme: "Let us make merry; for my son was dead, and is alive again."

Gathering Prayer

All: Father of peace, we are joyful in your Word, your Son Jesus Christ, who reconciles us to you. Let us hasten toward Easter with the eagerness of faith and love. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Exploring the Word

Gospel Reading: Luke 15:1-3,11-32

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable: ...

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; ¹² and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them.

¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living.

¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and

before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; ²³ and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; ²⁴ for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to make merry.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Gospel Notes

1-2. This is not the first time that publicans and sinners approach Jesus (cf. Mt 9:10). They are attracted by the directness of our Lord’s preaching and by his call to self-giving and love. The Pharisees in general were jealous of his influence over the people (cf. Mt 26:2-5; Jn 11:47) a jealousy, which can also beset Christians; a severity of outlook, which does not accept that, no matter how great his sins may have been, a sinner can change and become a saint; a blindness which prevents a person from recognizing and rejoicing over the good done by others. Our Lord criticized this attitude when he replied to his disciples’ complains about others casting out devils in his name: “Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me” (Mk 9:39). And St Paul rejoiced that others proclaimed Christ and even overlooked the fact they did so out of self-interest, provided Christ was preached (cf. Phil 1:17-18).

12. “That son, who receives from the father the portion of the inheritance that is due to him and leaves home to squander it in a far country ‘in loose living’, in a certain sense is the man of every period, beginning with the one who was the first to lose the inheritance of grace and original justice. The analogy at this point is very wide-ranging. The parable indirectly touches upon every breach of the covenant of love, every loss of grace, every sin” (*Dives in misericordia*, 5).

14-15. At this point in the parable we are shown the unhappy effects of sin. The young man’s hunger evokes the anxiety and emptiness a person feels when he

Only the heart Of Christ Who knows the depths of his Father's love could reveal to us the abyss of his mercy in so simple and beautiful a way.

1443 During his public life Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the community of the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them. A remarkable sign of this is the fact that Jesus receives sinners at his table, a gesture that expresses in an astonishing way both God's forgiveness and the return to the bosom of the People of God.(Cf. Lk 15; 19:9)

1468 "The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship."(Roman Catechism, II, V, 18) Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and effect of this sacrament. For those who receive the sacrament of Penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation "is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation."(Council of Trent (1551): DS 1674) Indeed the sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God.(Cf. Lk 15:32)

1700 The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God (*article 1*); it is fulfilled in his vocation to divine beatitude (*article 2*). It is essential to a human being freely to direct himself to this fulfillment (*article 3*). By his deliberate actions (*article 4*), the human person does, or does not, conform to the good promised by God and attested by moral conscience (*article 5*). Human beings make their own contribution to their interior growth; they make their whole sentient and spiritual lives into means of this growth (*article 6*). With the help of grace they grow in virtue (*article 7*), avoid sin, and if they sin they entrust themselves as did the prodigal son(Lk 15:11-32) to the mercy of our Father in heaven (*article 8*). In this way they attain to the perfection of charity.

1846 The Gospel is the revelation in Jesus Christ of God's mercy to sinners.(Cf. Lk 15) The angel announced to Joseph: "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."(Mt 1:21) The same is true of the Eucharist, the sacrament of redemption: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."(Mt 26:28)

2795 The symbol of the heavens refers us back to the mystery of the covenant we are living when we pray to our Father. He is in heaven, his dwelling place; the Father's house is our homeland. Sin has exiled us from the land of the covenant,⁵⁶ but conversion of heart enables us to return to the Father, to heaven.(Jer 3:19-4:1a; Lk 15:18, 21) In Christ, then, heaven and

reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Catechism of The Catholic Church

545 Jesus invites *sinner*s to the table of the kingdom: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mk 2:17; cf. I Tim 1:15) He invites them to that conversion without which one cannot enter the kingdom, but shows them in word and deed his Father's boundless mercy for them and the vast "joy in heaven over one sinner who repents". (Lk 15:7; cf. 7:11-32) The supreme proof of his love will be the sacrifice of his own life "for the forgiveness of sins". (Mt 26:28)

589 Jesus gave scandal above all when he identified his merciful conduct toward sinners with God's own attitude toward them. (Cf. Mt 9:13; Hos 6:6) He went so far as to hint that by sharing the table of sinners he was admitting them to the messianic banquet. (Cf. Lk 15:1-2, 22-32) But it was most especially by forgiving sins that Jesus placed the religious authorities of Israel on the horns of a dilemma. Were they not entitled to demand in consternation, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2:7) By forgiving sins Jesus either is blaspheming as a man who made himself God's equal, or is speaking the truth and his person really does make present and reveal God's name. (Cf. Jn 5:18; 10:33; 17:6,26)

1423 It is called the *sacrament of conversion* because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father (Cf. Mk 1:15; Lk 15:18) from whom one has strayed by sin. It is called the *sacrament of Penance*, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction.

1439 *The process of conversion and repentance* was described by Jesus in the parable of the prodigal son, the center of which is the merciful father (Cf. Lk 15:11-24) the fascination of illusory freedom, the abandonment of the father's house; the extreme misery in which the son finds himself after squandering his fortune; his deep humiliation at finding himself obliged to feed swine, and still worse, at wanting to feed on the husks the pigs ate; his reflection on all he has lost; his repentance and decision to declare himself guilty before his father; the journey back; the father's generous welcome; the father's joy - all these are characteristic of the process of conversion. The beautiful robe, the ring, and the festive banquet are symbols of that new life - pure worthy, and joyful - of anyone who returns to God and to the bosom of his family, which is the Church.

is far from God. The prodigal son's predicament describes the enslavement which sin involves (cf. Rom 1:25; 6:6; Gal 5:1): by sinning one loses the freedom of the children of God (cf. Rom 8:21; Gal 4:31; 5:13) and hands oneself over to the power of Satan.

17-21. His memory of home and his conviction that his father loves him cause the prodigal son to reflect and to decide to set out on the right road. "Human life is in some way a constant returning to our Father's house. We return through contrition, through the conversion of heart, which means a desire to change, a firm decision to improve our life and which, therefore, is expressed in sacrifice and self-giving. We return to our Father's house by means of that sacrament of pardon in which, by confessing our sins, we put on Jesus Christ again and become his brothers, members of God's family" (Bl. J. Escriva, *Christ is passing by*, 64).

20. "There is no doubt that in this simple but penetrating analogy the figure of the father reveals to us God as Father. The conduct of the father in the parable and his whole behavior, which manifests his internal attitude, enables us to rediscover the individual threads of the Old Testament vision of mercy in a synthesis which is totally new, full of simplicity and depth. The father of the prodigal son is *faithful to this fatherhood, faithful to the love* that he had always lavished on his son. This fidelity is expressed in the parable not only by his immediate readiness to welcome him home when he returns after having squandered his inheritance; it is expressed even more fully by that joy, that merrymaking for the squanderer after his return, merrymaking which is so generous that it provokes the opposition and hatred of the elder brother, who had never gone far away from his father and had never abandoned the home.

"The father's fidelity to himself [...] is at the same time expressed in a manner particularly charged with affection. We read, in fact, that when the father saw the prodigal son returning home 'he had *compassion*, ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him.' He certainly does this under the influence of a deep affection, and this also explains his generosity towards his son, that generosity which so angers the elder son" (*Dives in misericordia*, 6).

"When God runs towards us, we cannot keep silent, but with St Paul we exclaim, *Abba, Pater*: 'Father, my Father! (Rom 8:15), for, though he is the creator of the universe, he doesn't mind our not using high-sounding titles, nor worry about our not acknowledging his greatness. He wants us to call him Father; he wants us to savor that word, our souls filling with joy [...].

"God is waiting for us, like the father in the parable, with open arms, even though we don't deserve it. It doesn't matter how great our debt is. Just like the prodigal son, all we have to do is open our heart, to be homesick for our Father's house, to wonder at and rejoice in the gift which God makes us of being able to call ourselves his children, of really being his children, even

though our response to him has been so poor" (Bl. J. Escriva, *Christ is passing by*, 64).

25-30. God's mercy is so great that man cannot grasp it: as we can see in the case of the elder son, who thinks his father loves the younger son excessively, his jealousy prevents him from understanding how his father can do so much to celebrate the recovery of the prodigal; it cuts him off from the joy that the whole family feels. "It's true that he was a sinner. But don't pass so final a judgment on him. Have pity in your heart, and don't forget that he may yet be an Augustine, while you remain just another mediocrity" (Bl. J. Escriva, *The Way*, 675).

We should also consider that if God has compassion towards sinners, he must have much much more towards those who strive to be faithful to him. St Therese of Lisieux understood this very well: "What joy to remember that our Lord is just; that he makes allowances for all our short comings, and knows full well how weak we are. What have I to fear then? Surely the God of infinite justice who pardons the prodigal son with such mercy will be just with me 'who am always with Him?'" (*The story of Soul*, chap. 8).

Gospel Reflection

Most young adults chomp at the bit to leave home and get out on their own, thinking this is the way they can do what they want. No more adults in authority telling them what to do—they are quite capable of ordering their own lives (so they think). Frequently these young folks find out just how expensive living is, and paying for rent, food, utilities, transportation, etc., isn't as easy as it looks. Some of them, quite chagrined, are forced to move back home to get out of debt and begin again. So we readily identify from experience with the prodigal son in the gospel who is chomping at the bit to leave home. He is even bold enough to ask for his share of the inheritance! How little he knows about life; and how little he knows his father!

The gospel begins with the Pharisees and scribes complaining that Jesus welcomes and eats with sinners—how little they understand God! So Jesus tells a parable. When the prodigal son came "to his senses" and returned home, the most he hoped from his father was to be given a place as a servant and adequate food to eat. But the merciful father was prodigious: he embraced him, clothed him in dignity, and honored him with a feast. Sinners though we are, our merciful Father longs to embrace and celebrate with us. We have only to return to him.

Expecting, hoping, anticipating minimal response from his father, the son returned home to receive lavishly from his father. The father didn't even answer the son's plea for minimal acceptance; he simply began the concrete events of showing mercy and welcome. The point: Jesus' welcome of sinners makes visible the love and mercy of God our Father, a love and mercy we all need because we all are sinful. Further, the "ministry of reconciliation" (second reading) given us by God places us in the role of the merciful father, reminding us of not only the value but also the necessity of forgiveness. Forgiveness brings us to accept others (and ourselves) as weak human beings who often hurt others and cause them anguish. We are like the prodigal father when we are compassionate and forgiving toward those who

have harmed us. Then we are like our merciful God who treats us in just this same way.

The father is a model of mercy and reconciliation. It is the father who models for us paschal mystery living. It is the father in the parable who models for us the mercy of our heavenly Father—mercy that not only forgives and reconciles but offers a feast as well.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Our human tendency is to think we can make a go of life on our own. If we are happy to settle for minimums, some of us can muddle through life reasonably happy. This parable reminds us that God offers us much more.

If we choose to die to self ("coming to [our] senses") and return to God, we are greeted with forgiveness and feasting. Even more, at our heavenly Father's Feast we aren't simply welcomed back as the sons and daughters we were, but we are transformed into more perfect sons and daughters sharing in divine life. We feast on much more than a fattened calf; the Feast to which we are invited is nothing less than the Body and Blood of the Son. Receiving God's forgiveness and mercy, and offering the same to one another, is how we pass from Wednesday ashes to Easter feasting.

Old and New Testament links

First Reading — Joshua 5:9-12

⁹ And the LORD said to Joshua, "This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.

¹⁰ While the people of Israel were encamped in Gilgal they kept the passover on the fourteenth day of the month at evening in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹ And on the morrow after the passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. ¹² And the manna ceased on the morrow, when they ate of the produce of the land; and the people of Israel had manna no more, but ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 34:1-6

¹ I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

² My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and be glad.

³ O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!

⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

⁵ Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.

⁶ This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.

Second Reading — 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

¹⁷ Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ