

4th Sunday of Lent

God's love is universal and at the same time, it is personal. Our God is concerned about 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.

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 baptized 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 baptized 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.

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. 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.

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 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.

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 runs to him, clasps him in his arms and kisses him tenderly, 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". In this parable, Jesus teaches us the depth of the generosity of God and his mercy.

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. When we come to Him, He washes away all our evil deeds of the past, not holding them against us.