

4th Sunday of Lent (C)

30th March 2025

'Reconciliation as homecoming'

Josh 5: entry into the promised land
through Christ ...

2Cor 5: *God reconciled us to Himself*
Lk 15: 1–3, 11–32: the prodigal son

What with its being *Mothers' Day today*, I was looking into some of the origins of this long-standing tradition. Mothering Sunday seems to combine elements not only of honouring our mothers and the love they have given us, but also of honouring *our mother the Church* who also has such care for us. Church and domestic celebrations have long been combined like this on mid Sunday of Lent, *Laetare* Sunday. In former times, especially when servants often found work some distance from their families, Mothering Sunday was that day before the busy time of Easter when they were given a weekend off in order to return home, to visit their mothers and to visit their parish church. Though many of you will not be able to make that journey to be with your mother today, yet perhaps you can still celebrate in prayer — and maybe in a phone call — the love which they have lavished on you at home over the years. Coming home can be, and should be, a joy, if we really are welcomed into a home where love is the rule.

Today we hear of *two happy homecomings*: in the 1st reading the Hebrew people finally arrive in the promised land after leaving Egypt. Their 40 years in the desert ends as God brings them to the home which in His love He'd prepared for them in Israel. Then, of course, in the Gospel, Jesus's famous parable, the prodigal son is welcomed home to the love of his father's house despite his waste and waywardness. The Lord always wants to lead us home, to the place where He will care for, protect, and provide for us. But *we have to want* to go home to Him!

We're hearing, this Lent, the 'Year C' readings, which means that the lectionary for Sunday — our readings at Mass — draws its Gospel passages primarily from St Luke. *Almost all the great parables of mercy* come in Luke (we had one last week too, Lk 13:1–9); and from start to finish his Gospel reads like a *hymn to mercy*: from the *Magnificat* of Our Lady in ch.1 ("*His mercy is from age to age on those who fear Him*"); to the appeal of St Peter at the beginning of Jesus's ministry (Lk 5, "*leave me, Lord, I am a sinful man*"); to the final moment of Jesus's Passion

on the Cross, forgiving the repentant thief (Lk 23, “*today you will be with Me in paradise*”). St Luke mediates to us the words of *the Saviour all-merciful*.

Lent in ‘Year C’ hinges, I would say, around this Sunday Gospel today: the greatest parable of mercy in St Luke, and the most famous: ‘The Prodigal Son’ also known as, or perhaps *better* known as, ‘The Forgiving Father.’ I would like to suggest that this Gospel passage, on this mid-Lent *Laetare* Sunday, of the Holy Year, is the centrepiece of this Jubilee Year of Hope. If we understand this parable, and if we live its message, then we cannot go wrong in life, for God’s mercy is the source of so much hope. The *mesmerising array of fine detail* in the parable leads us to understand God our forgiving Father so much better: Our Lord paints a detailed picture of the Father. Let’s remember: this is not some man-made image of God, some hoped-for laxity on God’s part that we think up to get us off the hook for our wrongdoing. No, this is the authoritative teaching of the Son of God. What He says is true, therefore: this is what God is like! He is in fact a

merciful Father. But precisely because it’s one of the best-known of Jesus’s parables, does it really strike us any more with the force it should, or does it wash over us without sinking in? We know what’s going to happen, and the interpretation is very clear: God is the loving Father who always welcomes us back when we have sinned. But the brilliance of Jesus’s parables always means a closer look:

(1) For a start, it’s **the son who chooses to leave** the father, not the father abandoning the son. Nor does he just go with a bit of a loan from his dad — he goes with half the inheritance! This was effectively like his saying, “Dad, I wish you were dead, as I’d rather have your money than you!” — What about us? When we sin do we realise what we do? Although everything we’ve got we received from God, when we sin we want to be in charge ourselves, to live as if He weren’t there, to disregard Him.

(2) Then what of his being reduced to **feeding the pigs**? This wasn’t just a job which happened to be a bit unpleasant. For Jews it was the lowest of the low, since pigs were considered unclean animals and he had *to live with them*, and felt almost as if he’d eat their pig food! — What of us?

To stay in our sins is not healthy. The less we even think of asking forgiveness, the more we get bogged down in spiritual mediocrity. Don't keep putting off coming to confession and letting the sins pile up. Come and have them washed away!

(3) Jesus describes the son as suddenly “**coming to his senses.**” He realises what a sorry state he's in, and where the obvious solution lies: *at home*. Perhaps his motives are a bit mixed; maybe he just wants a good meal! Jesus leaves it ambiguous. — What about us? Maybe some sorrow for our sins is a bit mixed, not totally pure, not quite that act of perfect contrition. Nevertheless, we know what we must do. *We too must 'come to our senses,'* and make the journey back to the Lord, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

(4) Perhaps the son has a certain confidence in his father's forgiveness. Nevertheless, he doesn't just go up to his father dumbly; **he prepares his little speech** — and for us it's by *putting our faults into words* in Confession that we come to a healthy appreciation of what's going wrong. A vague mental idea of 'doing better' doesn't amount to the same.

(5) Perhaps the most poignant moment in the parable is this: that **the father was obviously on the lookout** for his son

every day, because “*while he was still a long way off He saw him*” — for us, God is wanting all the time for us to turn again: ‘will today be the day?’ God can't do our sorrow for us; He does the forgiving the moment we turn back, but He can't do our *turning* for us, can He? The father doesn't wait for the son to get to the house, or make him grovel at his feet — just the opposite: the father chooses himself to run out of the house, down the drive, eager to embrace his son once again. Even more than that, the father doesn't let his son finish his words of sorrow, does he? — he *interrupts* the son; notice how he never lets him complete the prepared little speech; he cuts him off: he's so set on lavishing love and forgiveness on him, not reluctantly, but fully, restoring him to sonship. This is the awesome truth of God's welcoming us home and freeing us of our sins. He watches out each day longingly to see, ‘Is this the day my son returns to Me?’ / ‘Is this the day my daughter turns back to Me?’ Then, the very moment we make a move, come to our senses, turn around to face the Father once more after turning our backs on Him in sin, there He is, already running towards us; not waiting for us to approach fearfully into His awesome presence, but

running along to the road to meet us. We make our confession, but He cuts us off before we grind ourselves into the ground in guilt and despair; He lifts us up in hope, reinstates us as sons and daughters, restores us to our baptismal dignity. Jesus was the one who lay down repeatedly in the dust of the ground, on the way to Calvary; He is the one who has been crushed by our sins — He has suffered that for us; He doesn't expect us to have to do that all over again; so the Father quickly and without great inquisition lifts us to our feet again, re-clothes us in our festive, baptismal garment, washed and made clean. This is the reality; this isn't some figment of our imagination: this is the word of the living God; this is the nature of God, to be merciful and constantly to extend to us that hand that lifts us to our feet without humiliating us.

(6) We need to explain the final part of the parable, the response of the merciful Father to the indignant elder son, the one who refused to welcome back his wayward younger brother, and who resisted sharing in the joy of his return. We cannot hold on to grudges; we cannot allow ourselves to be imprisoned by a refusal to forgive: life is too short for that,

and life given us by God is not designed for that! The elder brother also needs to learn from the merciful Father, just as much as the younger brother.

There are two dimensions of forgiveness that are necessarily interlinked: the mercy we seek from the Father; and the mercy we need to show to one another. We cannot have — or expect — one without the other, any more than we pray merely in the *Our Father*, “Forgive us our trespasses ...” No, we pray in the *Our Father*, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We have to learn both the lessons of this parable: the lesson of being forgiven; and of forgiving. Both are lessons that aren't always easy to learn, given our insidious pride; I think that they take a lifetime of learning, and of repeatedly hearing the Gospel to learn. But what a joy and a blessing for human life if these lessons of mercy are learnt! This is the joy that is at the heart of the Church's *laetare* today — her joy at God's great mercy! The message for Lent is clear: take the chance in the next 3 weeks for the joyful Sacrament of reconciliation. “*Be reconciled to God,*” as St Paul says: this happy homecoming to the Father is what Confession is all about!