

LENT 4- 2022
Joshua 5:9-12
2 Cor 5:17-21
Lk 15:1-3;11-32

Scripture assures us that God is merciful and while he passes judgement, he rescues and redeems. God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and commanded them to remember this event every year. This is done at Passover. Today's first reading tells us that they first remembered their exodus from Egypt in the Promised Land.

The gospel reading is well known and it also concerns God's judgement and mercy. Those who initially heard this parable would be amazed at the actions of the father who they would have expected to refuse the Prodigal Son's demand for money. When the son returned they would have expected his father to treat him as a servant until he showed some stability and proved himself to be reliable. The father did neither.

What drives the Prodigal home is his sense of need. He had wasted his money, his so-called friends had duped him and now as a Jew, he ends up feeding pigs – how much lower could he sink? During his absence his father made no attempt to find him but waited for him to return home. When he did, his father ran to meet him. To run was deemed to be an unseemly thing for a Jewish gentleman to do. But run he did, such was his joy. The father hugged and kissed his son so preventing him from falling on his knees. These actions are a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. The best clothes were given to the Prodigal- a sign of honour, a ring as a sign of authority and shoes as a sign that he was a free man – only slaves went barefoot.

The lost had been found, the sinner was restored. The father had forgiven his son before he returned home, but the Prodigal would not have known that, nor experienced the joy of forgiveness if he had not returned home. And there is a lesson for us. God doesn't come searching for us when we wander away, he waits for us to return to him.

Forgiveness is a gift. It takes the suffering of humility to ask for forgiveness and it takes the suffering of love to offer it. Forgiveness cannot change the past – the Prodigal had no more money – but it restores the relationship between the parties involved. Whatever the son had done, he was still the father's son. All parents understand this. Forgiveness is the first step on the road to healing.

In contrast, the elder brother held on to his self-focussed anger. His father reacts to this by assuring him that nothing between them had changed but points out that it is fitting to rejoice when what was lost is found and what was dead is alive and reconciliation occurs. Joy is the response to repentance.

In this parable, the father is God who responds to the return to him of sinners and Gentiles in the person of the Prodigal. The elder brother represents the Pharisees who were assured that God's love for them had not changed. God has given us free will. The Prodigal exercised

his and made bad choices. Even so, God continued to love him, but waited for him to choose to return home. Only then could restoration freely take place.

On the Cross, the open arms of Jesus express the suffering of God's love for us. He suffers because he loves us and through the self-offering of Jesus, God has "reconciled the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them" as St Paul's expresses it. This is forgiveness writ large.

We are God's ambassadors, agents of the Agent of God who are called to live the message that God made Jesus the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God.

Msgr Harry Entwistle

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