

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT, C
THE LAVISHING FATHER AND HIS UNDESERVING SONS

“I will leave this place and go back to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants” (Luke 15: 18-19)

Laetare Sunday: The Fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally called “Laetare Sunday.” Laetare is the Latin word for “Rejoice” as proclaimed in the Entrance Antiphon: “Rejoice Jerusalem, and all who love her ...” The Church encourages us to rejoice as we have journeyed beyond the halfway through this season of mortification and penance. It is time for us to relax, rejoice and refuel for the remaining part of the race.

The Parable before Us: This week, we are invited to reflect on the theme of God’s lavishing mercy and unconditional forgiveness as beautifully presented by St. Luke in the Gospel (Lk. 15: 1-3, 11-32). This narrative of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, told only in the Gospel of Luke, is one of the most popular stories in the Bible. Pope Benedict XVI describes it as: “the peak of spirituality and literature of all time.” Its creative presentation and significance has attracted many different names by many scholars: The Story of the Prodigal Father (because the father in the story was “wastefully extravagant” with his two sons); The Story of the Merciful Father (because the father showed “extravagant” mercy to his returnee wasteful second son); The Parable of the Father and His Two Lost Sons (because in the story the father is out waiting for his sons, who are both lost in a sense, to come back in); The Parable of the Running Father (because the story tells us that as soon as the father saw the returning son from a distance he ran towards him); and lastly, some have called it, The Parable of the Absent Mother (because in all the story, the mother is not mentioned, and that if the mother had been there, the incident might not have taken the same course). So, which title would you prefer and why? Let us consider it as “The Story of the Lavishing Father and His Underserving Sons” because the father is very lavishing with his two sons – giving to the younger one a part of his wealth when he did not deserve it; and equally lavishing towards his older son because in his defiance, the father went out to beg him, offering him a rare opportunity to change his mind but he would not. Both sons were underserving of these acts of kindness and mercy.

What necessitated this parable? St. Luke tells us that Jesus was in the company of “The tax collectors and sinners” perhaps at a meal. And “The Pharisees and the Scribes” complained: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15: 1-2). But why did Jesus prefer this kind of company? Why did He love them? Jesus offers the clear reason: “I came not for the righteous but for sinner” (Luke 5: 32). To call them to repentance. These are the “the sick” who need the physician (Luke 5: 31); they are “the lame”, “the crippled”, “the demoniacs”, “the hungry”, “the prostitutes” and “the blind.” These are all His patients who need to be cured, and not the proud, self-righteous, all-knowing Pharisees and the Scribes. His love for these “weak ones” was intrinsic to His mission. Where do we belong here? How do we relate with the “least” of our brothers?

The Parable and Jesus’ Listeners: Therefore, in response to this query by the Pharisees and the Scribes, Jesus narrates this world acclaimed parable rooted in Jewish historical facts to teach us some immortal truths about God’s compassion. After the reign of King Solomon, Israel split into two kingdoms, becoming like two brothers living side by side in the northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) Palestine (1 Kings 12). By the eighth century BC, the Assyrians conquered and carried off the northern tribes of Israel into exile in a “distant country”, where they forsook God and worshipped idols. This was considered harlotry by the prophets (1 Kings 15: 30; Jer. 3: 6; Hos. 4: 15). Jeremiah 31: 18-20 is more exact, where Ephraim (northern Israel), the youngest brother of the family of Israel (Gen. 48: 14), after a period of exile and disgrace, repents of his sins, ashamed of his wrongdoings and returns to God for mercy. In the new covenant, God welcomes his exiled son by lavishing him with mercy and restoring him to full sonship (Ezek. 37: 21-23; Hos. 11:1-3, 11). This parable also recalls the two-brothers’ stories in the Old Testament where the younger son triumphs over his elder brother. We remember the Cain and Abel story (Gen. 4: 1-16); Esau and Jacob (Gen. 25: 27-34; 27: 1-36); Joseph and his brother (Gen. 37:1-4; 37-45). Therefore, this parable was resonated with Jesus’ listeners at the time.

The Lessons For Us: The parable is rich with life-changing lessons. By granting his younger son’s request, the parable reveals God as lavishly and extravagantly generous, pouring on us abundant blessings, graces, and favours even when we do not deserve. St. John reminds us to “think of the love the Father has lavished upon us, by letting us be called God’s children; and that is what we are (1 Jn. 3: 1). The fleeing of the younger to a “distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery” points to the inner urge to relax our devotion to

God when the goings are good. But notice that the departure from home is a departure from the father's love, a departure from the love of God. As a man walks away from God, he becomes less himself. The hardship the younger son experiences and the famine in the land points to the fact that no matter how wealthy we may be(come) we have no control of the future. When we take control of our lives, we learn the simple things of life the hard way. That is what happened when the extravagant spender ran out of money and had to feed the "forbidden animal" among the Jews. This is the wrath of sins in our lives, it takes us down the ebb, deprives us of our dignity and humanity, and severs our relationship with the Father. But the prodigal son did not lose sight of home, he was forced to remember the riches of his father when he became aware of his situation and deprivation. At this point, the young man made up his mind to return to the father: *"I will leave this place and go back to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants"* (Luke 15: 18-19). He followed his decision with action. We often take good decisions but fail to follow through. Decision without actions is nothing at all. The father's anxiety and eagerness for the return of his son is captured by his sighting him "a long way off." This demonstrates God's eagerness to our return, as depicted by the shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep on search of the missing one. God is always waiting patiently for our decisions and action to "leave this place" of sin, desolation, humiliation, weakness, vanity, greed, selfishness, immorality, negligence, waywardness and more. The father's unquestioning welcome is strikingly significant. God forgives us without asking questions – His forgiveness is unconditional. The dressing with ring, sandals and robe signifies the son's restoration to his original position of sonship. Nothing taken away, nothing denied. When God forgives, He restores. We need to watch out for the weaknesses of the eldest son – he has a strong sense of entitlement; does not seem to have been serving the father out of love but for expected reward; he was judgemental, presumptuous, self-righteous, disobedient, and defiant. Sometimes, we relate with God with a sense of entitlement and reward.

My dear friends, the Parable of the Prodigal Son reveals the Face of God as a merciful Father to us. It is a story that should encourage us, especially at the season of Lent, to embrace the Sacrament of Reconciliation with the humility and resolution of the second son. Let us therefore decide to "leave this place and go back to my father."