**FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT “LAETARE SUNDAY” (YEAR C)**

Saint Rupert, Bishop; Blessed Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, Carmelite priest and founder

Jos 5:9a,10-12; Ps 34; 2Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-3,11-32

*Taste and see the goodness of the Lord*

**COMMENTARY**

*The Return to the Joy of the Father*

“The Fourth Sunday of Lent is suffused with light, a light reflected on this ‘Laetare Sunday’ [‘Rejoice!’] by vestments of a lighter hue and the flowers that adorn the church” (*Homiletic Directory* no.73). In this context of joy for “the approaching Easter,” we rejoice as we listen again to the famous parable, known as the parable of the prodigal son or that of the merciful father. It is truly a gem of the Gospel narrative that, as a preacher once told me, alone has provoked more conversions than all other rhetoric on the topic of forgiveness. The risk, however, is this: we are so accustomed to the story line, to the point that as soon as we hear the first phrase “A man had two sons,” we can quickly jump to the well-known ending, turning off our attention, waiting impatiently for the end of the Gospel’s proclamation!

However, every word of God proclaimed is never lifeless, because it is the living God who speaks to the hearts of the faithful. It contains ever new messages to every hearer who listens to God’s word with faith, humility, and a pinch of healthy curiosity to understand more about some aspects never before considered. Concretely, we can always learn something new from this parable, if we examine its rich content in more detail. With a small measure of curiosity, I ask, if “a man had two sons, (…) and the father divided the property between them,” how much would the younger son have received? You could think that each of them would have received half of their father’s estate, but perhaps this was not the case. According to Jewish law, in such a situation, the eldest son received two thirds for his primogeniture (cf. Deut 21,17), while the younger son received only one third! Such a detail, now unearthed, may surprise us and so encourage us to reflect more deeply and thoroughly upon this very popular parable in order to discover some new perspectives on the three main characters of the story. This is surely relevant for our Lenten conversion journey this year.

*1. The Younger Son’s Repentance*

It is very beautiful and moving the return of the younger son to his father after he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation, far from his father’s house. (The distance is underlined with the mention of “swine” in the place where the destitute prodigal son lived. He was distant both geographically and spiritually from the land of Israel because swine, considered unclean animals, were absent in the Jewish territories, emphasizing the humiliation the younger son had to suffer, even to the point of denying the tradition of his fathers for being forced to live with swine). It is therefore edifying and encouraging to those who listen to the parable, for no matter how far away we find ourselves from God, we can always return to the Father first spiritually and then physically. The parable invites to “come (back) to our senses” first and then to come back physically to God with a humble confession of the sins we have committed: “I have sinned”.

However, the account subtly indicates that such repentance of the prodigal son was not the result of his love for the father, but simply because he was hungry, as he himself admitted: “here am I, dying from hunger.” Yes, it is too banal, not very poetic, but cruelly true. The coming of the younger son to his senses is due not to his heart full of love and longing for the father, but to an empty stomach! Of course, that is fine too, and far be it from us to make any hasty judgements about it. Indeed, sometimes in life, Heaven, that is to say, the merciful God, has led many prodigal sons and daughters to learn from their encounter with physical hunger. When they reach rock bottom in their lives and their misery caused by themselves, this can be the only way to start thinking about the essential things in life. Actually, someone did share with me, “If I had not encountered such a critical situation of total failure, I might never have made my conversion to God to live happily now with Him and in His peace.” Therefore, we must always thank Heaven even for every “hunger” we experience (like that of the parable). It will never be a tragedy to be endured, but always an opportunity to be taken to our advantage. Help us, Lord and Holy Father, to hear your call to return to You, especially when we have nothing in our stomach!

Oddly, the younger son’s confession of sins appears to be a rehearsed statement, even calculated, without too much emotion. He seemingly memorized the “formula” and repeated it at the moment of the meeting with his father, word for word: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.” Interestingly, however, at the encounter with the father, the younger son was unable to finish the speech he had prepared with the final request: “Treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.” The father, in fact, immediately welcomed him, or rather absolved him, and restored his filial dignity with the (finest) robe, a ring, and sandals, without his asking for anything. The son’s repentance, though minimal (perhaps very close to zero or, at any rate, far from perfection), found nevertheless an unexpectedly generous response from his father who, just catching sight of him from afar, “was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.”

What an emotional and touching scene! I seem to see the image of the mystical encounter between the penitent and the merciful heavenly Father in the sacrament of confession. This is how the love-filled heart of God welcomes the return of his children, even when the repentance of some penitents is just a repetition of a “formula” of contrition or act of sorrow, like that of the prodigal son. It may be an imperfect act of repentance which is done not out of love for God, but out of habit, or out of secondary causes such as hunger or fear of punishment, but it is God’s great mercy that always overwhelms our poor and imperfect sorrow. The younger son’s repentance is certainly not at the center of the parable, but the generosity of the father who wants only to “see” the presence of his son to embrace him with a heart full of love, without judging whether he has returned with a sincere heart, or whether he has truly repented!

2. *The Father’s Merciful Love*

The father’s generous and unconditional love for his prodigal son emerges not only at the moment of their meeting, but even before. The biblical text emphasizes, “While he [the younger son] *was still a long way off*, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion…” How is it that the father was able to see his son on the horizon on that exact day and at that hour? Was it pure chance? Was the father tired that day or that afternoon and went out to the front garden to rest, and saw his son return by chance? Or maybe it was because since the son left him, every day the father went outside the house and, constantly fixing his eyes in the direction in which his son had travelled, waiting patiently for his return. Therefore, when the son returned, the father was able to see him immediately, because he waited for that instant every day. It seems to me, therefore, that the father’s merciful love is expressed not only in the gestures of compassion and welcome when he meets his son, but also, and above all, in his patient waiting for his return. And with this I am thinking of God’s waiting in the person of the priest who sometimes waits for hours and hours in the confessional without any penitent, but precisely in that patient waiting for some “prodigal son or daughter,” the confessor is demonstrating the heavenly Father’s patience. This is the mission of Christ’s missionaries who are precisely missionaries of mercy. If not today, perhaps someone will come [back] tomorrow; or, perhaps the day after tomorrow. One day he/she will surely return!

Returning to the parable, the father’s mercy was shown not only to the younger son, but also to the older son. Even the latter, ironically, “return” home from the fields, but “on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean.” A strange detail should be noted: the eldest son did not want to go back into his house when he heard “the music and dancing,” but called out a servant to find out what was happening. In all likelihood, knowing his father, he had already guessed this was something to do with his brother’s return. Indeed, after being informed, “He became angry, and (…) *he refused to enter the house*.” And it was here that the father showed all his patient love for this eldest son who now became, in fact, the rebel: “His father *came out and pleaded with him*.” This is a very unusual action in Jewish and generally Asian patriarchal culture (as in my own Vietnamese culture), where the father only commands, and never pleads with his children. Moreover, after the outburst of the eldest son calling his brother derogatorily “your son,” the father did not get angry and remonstrate with him for his lack of respect. Not only that, the father continues to call this rebellious son of his “son” and patiently explains to him the reason for the party. Indeed, to the eldest son who received two-thirds of his estate, the father reiterates his generosity in giving him everything: “My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.” This is the mercy of the Father, slow to anger and great in love; He does not take into account the offenses caused to Him and always keeps His heart open even to those who, although close to Him, sometimes make Him suffer more than those who are far away! This is the drama of the Father, the heavenly One, who never loses patience while waiting for the return of His children, far and near. Let us remember the beautiful observation of Pope Francis: “God never ever tires of forgiving us, (…) but at times we get tired of asking for forgiveness,” and returning to Him. (*Angelus*, Saint Peter’s Square, Sunday, 17 March 2013).

*3. The Eldest Son and a Possible “Re-Entry” into the Father’s Home*

Like the parable of the barren fig tree we heard last Sunday, today’s also has an open ending. After the father’s response with the invitation to rejoice over his brother’s return, we do not know what the eldest son’s reaction was. Did he, or did he not, re-enter the house? This is now the question! Each listener to the story, by his or her own actions, will decide the outcome. This is the subtle but urgent invitation that Jesus made through this ending of the parable to all his direct interlocutors, who were “the Pharisees and scribes [who] began to complain, saying: ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them,’” because, as Saint Luke the Evangelist points out, “So *to* *them* Jesus addressed this parable.” And right here, to return to the father’s house as the younger son did, we need a change of mentality, a going beyond the usual patterns of thought towards an evangelical conversion!

Among the Pharisees and scribes who were listening to Jesus at that time, we do not know how many actually welcomed his invitation to re-enter. Nevertheless, each one of us who listens to this parable today is called to do so now, always mindful of a loving and compassionate Father who is patiently awaiting the return of each of his children, far *and* near.

*Useful points to consider*:

**POPE FRANCIS, *Angelus*,** (*Saint Peter’s Square*,*4th Sunday of Lent, 6 March 201*6):

During the Lenten itinerary, the Gospel presents to us this very parable of the merciful Father, featuring a father with his two sons. The story highlights some features of this father who is a man always ready to forgive and to hope against hope. Especially striking is the father’s tolerance before the younger son’s decision to leave home: he could have opposed it, knowing that he was still immature, a youth, or sought a lawyer not to give him his inheritance, as the father was still living. Instead, he allows the son to leave, although foreseeing the possible risks. God works with us like this: He allows us to be free, even to making mistakes, because in creating us, He has given us the great gift of freedom. It is for us to put it to good use. This gift of freedom that God gives us always amazes me!

But the separation from his son is only physical; for the father always carries him in his heart; trustingly, he awaits his return; the father watches the road in the hope of seeing him. And one day he sees him appear in the distance (cf. v. 20). But this means that this father, every day, would climb up to the terrace to see if his son was coming back! Thus the father is moved to see him, he runs toward him, embraces him, kisses him. So much tenderness! And this son got into trouble! But the father still welcomes him so.

**POPE FRANCIS, *General Audience*,** (*Saint Peter’s Square*,*Wednesday, 11 May 201*6)

The elder son needs mercy too. The righteous, those who believe they are righteous, are also in need of mercy. This son represents us when we wonder whether it is worth all the trouble if we get nothing in return. Jesus reminds us that one does not stay in the house of the Father for a reward but because one has the dignity of being children who share responsibility. There is no “bargaining” with God, but rather following in the footsteps of Jesus who gave himself on the Cross without measure.

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad” (vv. 31-32). The father speaks like this to the older son. His logic is that of mercy! The younger son thought he deserved punishment for his sins, the elder son was waiting for a recompense for his service. The two brothers don’t speak to one another, they live in different ways, but they both reason according to a logic that is foreign to Jesus: if you do good, you get a prize; if you do evil you are punished. This is not Jesus’ logic, it’s not! This logic is reversed by the words of the father: “It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (v. 32). The father recovered a lost son, and now he can also give him back to his brother! Without the younger, the elder son ceases to be a “brother”. The greatest joy for the father is to see his children recognize one another as brothers.