

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 30, 2025

On this fourth Sunday of Lent, when the Church already rejoices in the coming feast of Easter, singing "Laetare Jerusalem", that's "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 fulfillment in life here and now. This search for happiness and fulfillment 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.

I guess we have heard and read this story of the Prodigal Son many times and probably heard countless homilies on it. It's a very rich story, but not one that really seems to have perplexing and hidden meanings. There is a kind of obviousness and clarity to most of what's going on in the story. We have the younger son. He seems to have an inflated sense of self, seems to think he can go it alone, can make his way without any help. And he seems to want to do whatever he wants to do, that is, wants to be free from any responsibilities beyond himself. After failing miserably, he has a kind of epiphany, and he returns home hoping he can undo what he did.

And we have his older brother, the one who didn't mess up, didn't cause offense, didn't neglect his duties. And, well, he can't bring himself to

rejoice in his brother's return, can't bring himself to be glad for his brother, can't be happy that his brother has not just been forgiven, but has been welcomed with open arms.

And then we have the dad. What a dad! If he is harboring any sort of hard feelings toward either of his sons, he is certainly not showing it. Those feelings are nowhere to be found. Instead, he simply shows an outpouring of love. Love for the son that returned. And love for the son that remained. And he seems so grateful. Grateful that his family is once again whole. Grateful that his younger son had a change of heart. Grateful that his older son stayed by his side through it all. Grateful that his prayers were answered. Sounds like someone I used to wonder if I could ever be.

One of these things is certainly not like the others. Two seem a little too caught up in themselves, one through excessive pride, and one through a harboring of a grudge, a resentment, a hard heart, an unwillingness to be happy for the mercy shown to someone else. But the one who stands alone in this story is the dad, full of mercy and kindness and joy and gratitude. Nothing he does or says points to a guy focused on himself. And we admire him for it.

None of this should surprise you. It's right there in the story for all to see. And it's the perfect story for Lent, a perfect story for this time of reflection. And that's because all three of these characters reside in one form or another in each of us. There's the one who seems to be full of excessive pride. There's the one who is unwilling to forgive. And then there's the other one - the one that seems to reveal the very best a person has to offer or has to be.

Yes, one of these things is not like the other but recognizing that person, the person God created us to be and calls us to be, is not as simple as kids game. The best in us and the worst in us are not as distinct, as visible, as clear as simple pictures lined up side-by-side. Rather, they are entangled, mixed together, superimposed on one another in such a way

that the true picture of what's going on in each of us can be blurry, opaque, or out of focus.

And untangling them is essentially a kind of spiritual work, a holy process, one which involves a kind of deep, honest self-reflection that can provide us with a clear picture of where we are right now and where we want to go, who we are right now and who we want to be. This type of contemplation and examination is one of the beautiful and necessary aspects of Lent. And if we haven't taken the time to do this spiritual work yet, well, there's only a few weeks left if we want this Easter to be the kind of Easter God wants for each of us.

An Easter in which we know ourselves better than we have before. An Easter in which we feel truly free from everything holding us back and weighing us down, that is, free from every failing, every stumble, every sin. An Easter in which we are more committed to loving more and giving more and forgiving more. Put simply, an Easter in which we rise with Jesus to a new way of life, a life beyond our wildest imagination, a life which we were meant to be living all along.

My dear people of God, what part of you is the younger son? What part of you is the older son? And maybe most importantly which part of you is the dad? Is he in there somewhere? Can you feel him? Can you see him? Do you want to be him? After all, he's the one not like the others and the one you were meant to be all along.

Short Story

A pastor heard that one of his parishioners was going about announcing to everyone that he would no longer attend church services. This rebellious parishioner was advancing the familiar argument that he could communicate with God just as easily out in the fields with nature as his setting for worship. One winter evening, the pastor called on him for a friendly visit. The two men sat before the fireplace making small talk, but studiously avoiding the issue of church attendance.

After a while, the pastor took the tongs from the rack next to the fireplace and pulled a single coal from the fire. He placed the glowing ember on the hearth. As the two watched in silence, the coal quickly ceased burning and turned an ashen grey, while the other coals in the fire continued to burn brightly. Slowly the pastor put back the charcoal into fire and it burnt brightly. The pastor's silent message was not lost on the parishioner. After a long pause, he turned to the pastor and said "I'll be back at mass next Sunday."