

4th Sunday of Lent (C)
(Joshua 5:9-12 / Luke 15:1-3.11-32)
06.03.2016

While today's gospel carries within it a powerful message of hope for those who have gone astray, giving them reason to turn to God to experience His abundant mercy, we should remember to whom the parable was first addressed, for the lesson contained in this story was for them initially.

Jesus told this story for the benefit of some Pharisees and scribes who were complaining that He was welcoming tax collectors and sinners who were seeking out His company.

Today's gospel parable was first spoken to people who considered themselves righteous. We can well imagine these people holding a *holier than thou* stance in their dealings with those they esteemed to be unworthy of God's love. Jesus challenged these harsh judges to change their attitude and modify their regard. He invited them to look at their brothers and sisters who were broken and messed up with greater mercy and compassion. In recounting today's parable, Jesus was calling righteous people to show their righteousness as God displays His: by a readiness to forgive and a willingness to offer to the fallen who have strayed the opportunity to make a fresh start in life.

Sitting here this morning, as people who fulfil our Sunday obligation by attending Eucharist (and many of us will even be daily communicants), Jesus' gospel parable is addressed to us. It challenges us as much as it did the religious people of Christ's time to whom it was first addressed. It calls upon us to repent and to manifest our repentance by changing the way we look at and evaluate others.

Is there not a danger for those who might classify themselves and/or be classified by others as *good Christians* to adopt the stance of the elder brother in Jesus' parable? Religious people can be shocked and scandalised by the display of generous mercy we see exhibited by the Father in the story of the two sons.

I know I have heard emanating from some good Christian circles a severe criticism of Pope Francis' constant emphasis on mercy and compassion. I have heard such criticisms voiced even in certain clerical circles – that's to say by men who have for mission to be witnesses to God's merciful love.

Some have gone as far as to express an irritation with all this talk about *the tender mercy of the heart of our God* clearly forgetting that this expression is a direct quotation from the Sacred Scriptures. Some of those uneasy with this talk actually recite the words they find to be too soft as they read the *Benedictus* at lauds each morning.

How easily God's goodness is forgotten and even resented by those who think and speak of themselves as Christians!

I heard one man say: *All this talk about mercy is not really presenting the gospel seriously.* How anyone could arrive at the conclusion that mercy is not a serious gospel message baffles me.

The gospel Jesus preached and would have us echo is Good News for the poor, a message of pardon. The Christian gospel is a proclamation of the Lord's love and mercy, revealed in His willingness to forgive all who sincerely repent.

To preach mercy is no travesty of what I heard one man call *the pure Christian message*, fearing it is being diluted by merciful pastors. Mercy is the very essence of the gospel.

So often in the past (and this can still be the case in the present), it has been those who have put all the emphasis upon righteousness, purity of doctrine and even strict morality, who have been exposed as living lives in total contradiction with real gospel principles.

Just think of our still recent history in Ireland.

We should not forget the horrible, disgraceful treatment to which many were subjected in what was deemed to be *holy Catholic Ireland*. Society at large made it impossible for many to retain their human dignity. To make things worse, in certain Church run institutions things were compounded further still. An example of this is how people's names were taken away from them. Even if they wanted to use their real name, the right to reveal their true identity was denied them. Many felt as if it had been taken away, robbed from them. I think especially of what happened in those places in which many were incarcerated to atone for their sins: Magdalene Institutions. *Sin has to be paid for* was the message they were fed. So much for grace! So much for free forgiveness!

Let those who defend doctrine explain to us how the message that *sins have to be paid for* tally with the doctrine of grace!

What happened in Catholic Church Institutions was mirrored and paralleled in those run by other Churches and Evangelical Societies. Catholics do not have the monopoly on self-righteousness and the guilt associated with this attitude.

If we are honest, we have to admit that there was little of the liberality of the merciful father as he is presented in today's gospel evidenced in many of the Religious/Christian Houses to which people were sent for confinement or those who were thought to be vulnerable were sent to be given safe refuge. This was true across the board, but it applied especially in regard to those who were called *fallen women*.

As one former Magdalene said to me once: *Isn't it interesting that there was never an expression fallen men, but there was one which was coined for 'fallen women'?* The woman I refer to just now was quite a remarkable lady. I was privileged to give her spiritual accompaniment in the latter years of her life. She had gone through a Magdalene Institution as a result of having been abandoned during a pregnancy. While she was forced to flee to England, the child's father maintained his good reputation as an upstanding Catholic businessman in the small Irish town in which she had worked as his secretary. He was an upright married man who was about twice her age. Not long before she died this remarkable lady gave me a text I would like to share with you this morning. I share it with you as a way of honouring her memory. It seems to me to be all the more appropriate to do so today, given the context in which we find ourselves. This is the Fourth Sunday of Lent, *Laetare* Sunday: the day that is kept as Mothers' Day.

It seems to me significant that I tell you how I come to share this text with you this morning. A couple of weeks ago I was doing a clean-out of my office. I dumped several bin bags of notes I had taken from courses I had followed as a theology student as well as piles of notes of classes I had given to others as a monastic formator/teacher. While I was able to let go of many courses on Christian doctrine and other theological subjects – Bible, Church history, liturgy and the like – I simply couldn't bring myself to cast aside one little crinkled paper I came across. I said to myself: *One day I will use that text. I will share it with others. It befalls me to do so to honour the memory of the person who gave it to me.* When I noticed yesterday evening that the title on the top of the page read *Communion Reflection* it was confirmed for me that it is appropriate to share it with you here in the course of this Eucharistic celebration.

The anonymous poem given to me by my former directee, a Magdalene, has God speak to us. It reads:

*Great poets have sung the beauties of home,
its comfort, its love and its joys;
how back to the place of its sheltering dome
I welcome the prodigal boy.*

*They picture his father with pardoning smile
and glittering robes to unfurl;
but none of the poets thought it worthwhile
to sing of the prodigal girl.*

*The prodigal son can resume his old place
as leader of fashion's mad whirl,
with never a hint of his former disgrace -
not so for the prodigal girl!*

*The girl may come back to the home she had left
but nothing is ever the same;
the shadows still linger o'er the dear ones left bereft,
society scoffs at her name.*

*Perhaps that is why when the prodigal girl
gets lost on life's devious track;
she thinks of the lips that will scornfully curl,
and hasn't the heart to come back.*

*Yes, welcome the prodigal son to his place;
kill the calf, fill the free-flowing bowl;
but shut not the door on his frail sister's face,
remember, she too has a soul.*

As I think back on my last meeting with that saintly lady, a Penitent, a Magdalene, I think of what she said to me from her deathbed. I recall how she spoke of *returning to the Father's House for the feast, how she would rejoice at that longed for celebration*. It was clear that she was ready to face her passage from this life into eternity with great serenity. She had such confident trust in God's mercy. Her assurance of God's love for her was total. She knew that the Father loves all His children – unconditionally! Others may speak about these things in theory (myself included), this woman experienced what we speak of. The marvellous thing about her is how she bore witness to God's love to so many others in her lifetime – not least by her simple acceptance of others as they were. I could see this acceptance displayed up to the very end by the way in which she welcomed and introduced to me some of the nurses, both male and female, who had their stories to tell, as they came in and out of her room.

When our time comes may our joy be as great to be going to the Father's house in the sweet assurance that we will be welcomed home with no disgrace, for God in His mercy forgives all. He does not hold our sin against us, as others would – and maybe even we ourselves would do.

God's name is mercy. Today's gospel depicts for us the One the apostle Paul calls: *God, the Father of mercies*.