

4th Sunday of Lent (C)  
(Joshua 5:9-12 / Luke 15:1-3.11-32)  
31.03.2019  
*Mercy*

Why did Jesus tell the parable of the prodigal son?

At the beginning of our reading today we heard the following explanation: “The tax collectors and the sinners were all seeking the company of Jesus to hear what he had to say, and the Pharisees and the scribes complained. So Jesus spoke this parable to them.”

It can be a bit demoralising to realise that, after 2000 years, things have not changed that much.

In the same way as, in Jesus’ time, Pharisees and scribes complained that Jesus attracted tax collectors and sinners, so today there are so-called Christians who complain that sinners and outcasts are welcomed into the company of believers.

They think that exclusion and excommunication are the best ways to foster community life and to bear witness to God. We must acknowledge that we are all tempted to dream of a perfect Christian community, where everybody is clean and obedient. We would all like the Church to be a kind of sanitised environment where all who are found are in good health.

We are dealing here with a vision of the church which leaves no room for mistakes, weaknesses and vulnerability.

Is this really the church as Jesus envisioned it? Does this fit with what happens in the parable of the prodigal son we have just heard?

There is another aspect which is challenged by Jesus’ parable: not only there is something strange in imagining the Church of Jesus Christ as an exclusive VIP club but there is also something quite puzzling in the belief that it is possible for a small select committee to know for sure who is worthy to be in or who has to be condemned and should remain out.

In our parable, the younger son who has been out wandering in a life of debauchery ends up being welcomed into the house while the eldest son who to begin lived in the house never disobeying his father ends up outside, refusing to enter the house because the younger brother has been welcomed in.

According to the formal and external criteria of obedience and conformity, the eldest son should be in the house and the young son kept outside. However God’s criteria are not ours, his ways are not our ways (cf. Is 55:8-9).

God does not judge on appearances. He does not judge according to our poverty but according to the desire of our hearts; the heart of the younger son is wounded and yet at rights, the heart of the elder son is also wounded but it is prisoner of its self-righteousness.

The great lesson of our Gospel reading is that God’s ultimate criterion is mercy, prodigal love.

This was as much a challenge for us now who want a church where conformity and security, sameness and strength matter most as it was for the Pharisees and the scribes in Jesus’ time.

Jesus’ parable is primarily a challenge to our narrow, rigid and all too human vision of what the nature and the mission of the Church are.

Outcasts, sinners, men and women who were considered to be impure were seeking the company of Jesus in order to hear what he had to say. That was the beginning of the Church and it remains the model of what our Christian communities should be.

Today there are many men and women who long for Jesus, for the solace of his presence, the comfort and encouragement of his words and yet these same people do not feel welcome in our Christian gatherings, because we prevent them from hearing what Jesus has to say to them. In our Gospel reading, what comes first are the loving embrace and the unconditional welcome of the father which allow the son to acknowledge his woundedness and poverty.

This happens not in the context of judgement and condemnation but in that of love and mercy within which we can be true to ourselves, to God and to others.

During Lent as we want to answer God's call to conversion, we must remember that everything begins in our hearts, which should become less narrow, judgemental, hard and stingy. In the prophet Isaiah, the Lord invites us to enlarge the site of our hearts, to let the curtains of our hearts be stretched and opened out (cf. 54:2).

The next step then is to work at the conversion of our Churches and Christian communities so that they may become more visibly sacraments of God's mercy in the world.

Our Churches are the objects and recipients of God's mercy. They are supposed to make present the Gospel of mercy through word, sacrament and life. We have all been baptised in God's love which gives life to all things. As we remember that "no structure can stand that is not built on the rock of God's mercy and steadfast love." (Thomas Merton, *Love...*, p. 204), let us allow God's mercy to overflow from our lives and from the lives of our communities so that the world, all men and women, may discover how much they are loved.