

Sunday 4th (C) of Lent

Gospel text (*Lk 15,1-3.11-32*): Tax collectors and sinners were seeking the company of Jesus, all of them eager to hear what He had to say. But the Pharisees and the scribes frowned at this, muttering: «This man welcomes sinners and eats with them». So Jesus told them this parable: «There was a man with two sons. The younger said to his father: ‘Give me my share of the estate’. So the father divided his property between them. Some days later, the younger son gathered all his belongings and started off for a distant land where he squandered his wealth in loose living. Having spent everything, he was hard pressed when a severe famine broke out in that land. So he hired himself out to a well-to-do citizen of that place and was sent to work on a pig farm. So famished was he that he longed to fill his stomach even with the food given to the pigs, but no one offered him anything. Finally coming to his senses, he said: ‘How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will get up and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against God and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me then as one of your hired servants’. With that thought in mind he set off for his father's house.

»He was still a long way off when his father caught sight of him. His father was so deeply moved with compassion that he ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. The son said: ‘Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son...’. But the father turned to his servants: ‘Quick! Bring out the finest robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and kill it. We shall celebrate and have a feast, for this son of mine

was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found'. And the celebration began.

»Meanwhile, the elder son had been working in the fields. As he returned and was near the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what it was all about. The servant answered: 'Your brother has come home safe and sound, and your father is so happy about it that he has ordered this celebration and killed the fattened calf'. The elder son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and pleaded with him. The indignant son said: 'Look, I have slaved for you all these years. Never have I disobeyed your orders. Yet you have never given me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends. Then when this son of yours returns after squandering your property with loose women, you kill the fattened calf for him'. The father said: 'My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But this brother of yours was dead, and has come back to life. He was lost and is found. And for that we had to rejoice and be glad'».

«Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before you»

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Today, Laetare ("Rejoice") Sunday, IV of Lent, we again hear that fetching fragment of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus justifies his unprecedented practice of forgiving sins to regain men for God.

I always wondered if the expression "prodigal son", which this parable is named after, is really understood by most people. I think we should rename it as the parable of the "Prodigious Father".

Because the Father of the parable —so moved by the return of that son ruined by

sin— is indeed an icon of our Heavenly Father reflected in the face of Christ: «He was still a long way off when his father caught sight of him. His father was so deeply moved with compassion that he ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him» (Lk 15:20). Jesus makes us clearly feel that any man, even the worst sinner, is so very important to God that He does not want to loose him in any way; and that He, with ineffable joy, is always willing to grant us forgiveness (even to the point of not sparing his own Son's life).

This Sunday has an air of serene joy and, this is why it is mentioned as the “Rejoice” Sunday, initial words of the antiphony at the beginning of today's Mass: «Rejoice O Jerusalem, celebrate all who love it». God felt sorry for the man who was lost and stranded, and has shown in Jesus Christ —dead and resurrected— his mercy towards him.

In his encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, John Paul II said that, in a story bruised by sin, God's love has turned into mercy and compassion. Jesus' Passion is the measure of that misericorde. Thus, we may be able to understand that the greatest joy we can provide God with is, perhaps, to let him forgive us by exposing our misery, our sins, to his mercy. With Easter around the corner we gladly come to the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, to the source of divine mercy: we shall give God a great joy, we shall remain full of peace and shall be more merciful to others. It is never too late to get up and go back to the Father that loves us!