Fourth Sunday of Lent (C)

Gospel text (*Lk* 15:1-3.11-32): Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So to them Jesus addressed this parable:

“A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.”’ So he got up and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began.

Now the older son had been out in the field and, 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. The servant said to him, ‘Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the

fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'"

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you"

Fr. Joan Ant. MATEO i García
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Today, in this Laetare Sunday ("Rejoice Sunday"), fourth of Lent, we hear again 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: "While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him 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", Saint 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 mercy. 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!

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “The Eternal Father with ineffable gentleness turned his loving eyes on that soul, and began to speak to her in this way: ‘My dearly beloved daughter! I have firmly determined to use mercy towards the whole world and provide for all the needs of men’.” (Saint Catherine of Siena)

- “Saint John Paul II in his encyclical "Dives in misericordia" explains that the love of God, in a history wounded by sin, has become mercy, compassion. The Passion of Jesus is the measure of this mercy.” (Benedict XVI)

- “The symbol of the heavens refers us back to the mystery of the covenant we are living when we pray to our Father. He is in heaven, his dwelling place; the Father's house is our homeland. Sin has exiled us from the land of the covenant, but conversion of heart enables us to return to the Father, to heaven. In Christ, then, heaven and earth are reconciled, for the Son alone ‘descended from heaven’ and causes us to ascend there with him, by his Cross, Resurrection, and Ascension.” (Catechism Of The Catholic Church, № 2795)