

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT, CYCLE C

Open with a prayer: *God of Compassion, we rejoice in your holy Word, Jesus, who again and again offers us mercy for our sins and helps us to forgive one another. As we continue our journey to Easter and heaven grant us the courage to change what needs to be changed in our lives and fill us with the joy that comes from experiencing you as a God of mercy. This we pray through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

Sharing of life: What are you most and least grateful for?

Facilitator reads focus statement: All three readings express the *homecoming* that we experience when we repent of sin and allow God to remove our guilt and shame. This Sunday is also called *Laetare* ("let us rejoice") Sunday. A mood of joy in God's mercy underlies our readings.

If you have not read the commentary on the reading, consider reading it after each reading.

FIRST READING: Joshua 5:9, 10-12

Our first reading today describes a moment of huge transition in Israel's history and at the same time celebrates God's faithfulness to his promises. Previous to this moment in time, the Israelites were an *enslaved people* in Egypt, and then they were a Nomadic *desert people*. Now they are about to enter the Land God promised to their ancestors. No longer will they be an enslaved people on alien soil and no longer will Israel feed on manna (symbolic of the desert). Now they will possess their own land and enjoy the abundant fruits of its soil.

Israel's entry into the land was an experience of mercy and reconciliation with God from whom they felt alienated while in Egypt. To celebrate this moment of transition in their history and their reconciliation with God, the Israelites have a Passover feast for the first time in their new homeland. Their reconciliation with God and the feast that followed prepares us to hear the story of the return of the prodigal son and the banquet given to celebrate his homecoming.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 34

This psalm of joy celebrates a God who blesses his people with good things.

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

In Christ, the believer becomes a new creation. Christ, through his death and resurrection, has reconciled us to God. In turn, we must be ambassadors of God's reconciling work.

"Christ was made to be sin," i.e., Christ became sin in the sense that he was born in weakened "flesh" and took upon himself all human sinfulness. Christ took on our sinful humanity so that we might take on his righteousness.

GOSPEL: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

This story should be renamed *The Parable of the Forgiving Father* since its central focus is not the son and his sin, but God and his mercy (which is also the primary focus of the Sacrament of Reconciliation).

The return of the son is celebrated with a festive meal symbolic of our return to the Eucharist after a time of being distant from God and church.

The *younger* son symbolizes the tax collectors and sinners who distance themselves from God by their sinful behavior. The *older* son symbolizes the Pharisees who distance themselves from God by their sin of self-righteousness. They would rather see a sinner damned than saved. Both are sinners and in need of God's mercy. The difference between the two is that the younger son *knows* that he is a sinner and in need of God's mercy.

However, it seems that the younger son's repentance was only skin deep. He went home because he had run out of

money. Yet, his father offered him full and total mercy. Hopefully, the son's experience of his father's love would lead him to a more authentic and sincere repentance and commitment.

The older son only paid lip service to the law. As one-writer states: "he was lawless within the law." His heart was resentful and cold. A part of his sin was his refusal or inability to share in the joy of his father over the return of his younger brother, not an easy thing to do. Yet, in God's eyes, this is the response that is being asked for.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, image or idea spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. In the first reading the Israelites experience a huge *transition* moment in their lives - the movement from being an *enslaved* and nomadic or *desert* people to being a people with their own land. What is the biggest transition you have had to negotiate in your life? What helped you to move successfully move through that time?
3. In the second reading, Paul says that we have been called to be "ambassadors of reconciliation". Can you name one way that you try to live this part of being a faithful disciple?
4. Which of the brothers in the gospel do you identify the most with? Why?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's scriptures. Suggestions: Is there someone in your world that you need to welcome home? If so, pray and work to make it happen. If not, work at being an ambassador of Christ for someone who is away from Christ and/or his church.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for your enemies if you have any. Pray for reconciliation within your own family if needed. Pray for reconciliation between churches, religions, especially between Muslims and Christians. ©

On the lighter side

Sunday school teacher asked her 3rd grade students: Who most regretted the return of the prodigal son? After a long pause, Johnny raised his hand and said "the fatted calf".

MORNING PRAYER

O Jesus,
through the Immaculate Heart of
your mother, Mary,
I offer you today my prayers,
my sufferings,
my disappointment, my joys,
and all my works.
I give you these together with all
that is offered to you
in sacrifice of the Mass everywhere
in the world.
I give this gift today in reparation
for my sins,
for the needs of my loved ones,
and for our
Holy Father. Amen