

Fourth Sunday of Lent  
(Jos 5:9a,10-12; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3,11-32)

It seems to me it's a little unfair to confront a celebrant with today's gospel and to expect him to compose a homily on it. I mean, how can you do a homily on a wonderful parable that needs no explanation?

Fortunately we can say that the first two readings, as well as the gospel, anticipate in some ways the glory of Easter.

The first reading from Joshua finds the Israelites encamped "at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho." They had already been delivered from slavery in Egypt (a type of our deliverance in Christ from sin and death), they had passed through the Red Sea (a type of our baptism), had entered into covenant with the Lord at Sinai (an anticipation of the new covenant in Christ), had completed the hard trek through the desert, fed with manna (a type of the Eucharist), and had at last entered the Promised Land (a type of our heavenly glory). Even the reference to cessation of manna, on which they had subsisted in the desert and eating the produce of the land (unleavened cakes) suggest a new, clean start.

St. Paul's reading from 2 Corinthians is just as full of paschal themes: "a new creation"; "new things have come," new--like the unleavened bread, like the purity and newness after baptism. But especially the theme of reconciliation: the root occurs five times in this brief passage. The goal of the Easter mystery is to accomplish

reconciliation. And here we find that wonderful, but mysterious, phrase, “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Up till now it has been “God who ... has reconciled us to himself through Christ” and “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,” just what we would expect: God is the active agent in reconciliation. And He does it by “not counting [our] trespasses against [us].” In spite of our sins, God lets us off the hook. And now, suddenly, it is something we are called upon to do. And notice the poignancy of the plea: “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” It was clear while God or Jesus was responsible, but how do WE go about doing it? Joseph Fitzmyer says that Paul “always speaks of God or Christ reconciling ... sinners to himself,” but he doesn't mention this passage.

We need to ask, “What is reconciliation?” It means a change from anger, hostility, or alienation to love friendship, or intimacy. Human beings can be said to be at enmity with God through sin. This estrangement only God can heal (through forgiveness, through what Christ has accomplished), and yet here Paul calls upon us “on behalf of Christ” to be reconciled, as though we were to take the first steps to heal the estrangement caused by our sins. A wonderful example of divine condescension.

And so we come to that gospel that no celebrant should be asked to homilize on, that parable so wonderfully wrought that no one can add anything to. We distinguish between parable, a story that has a point to make, and

allegory, but most parables have allegorical features. So in this one we cannot resist identifying the loving, forgiving father with God and the prodigal son with the sinner. The son, splurging his inheritance, is the equivalent of us renouncing the good things God has promised us for some measly worldly return. It also means we have no hope for the future, nothing to sustain us, for we have abandoned all. Since it is a story, we don't ask (and shouldn't ask) what is the son's later fate going to be, since he has spent his inheritance? Will the father provide for him? This is a parable; we don't ask those kinds of questions because it doesn't answer them.

So now we see that today's second reading on reconciliation is very relevant; although we think of the parable as an illustration of God's mercy, as indeed it is, it's also about reconciliation. The son has been foolish, as we all are when we sin, and so are alienated from God. The son certainly alienated himself from his father, but he did take the initiative in returning. We note this was only when hard times compelled him; so also we may need a kick in the rear before we come to our senses. The son is ready with his spiel, but he never gets to give it as he is smothered by his father's love. And the father certainly goes far beyond simple forgiveness, as he pulls out all the stops. This is reconciliation--nothing beggarly or reluctant about it.

But there is a further reconciliation possible in this story. The parable has been named not only "the prodigal son," but also "the forgiving father." But it could also be

named "the parable of the resentful brother." If we all can identify with the prodigal son by our sins and can appreciate the generous forgiveness of the father, we can probably all identify also with the resentful son. We see his envy of what the younger son has gotten away with, even while he condemns him, while at the same time being jealous of the father's love for the younger son (father=s favorite?).

After all this, we remember that a parable is not a pretty story to be admired but a *challenge* to respond to. And this one is especially apt for Lent. We confront this challenge by asking which of the figures we should identify with. Does anyone here claim to be sinless? Unless we are sinless we know we have angered God, perhaps many times, and need reconciliation; this parable tells what kind of reception we can expect from this loving, merciful Father, so anxious to forgive. It tells us we should not fail to trust in His mercy. At the same time it gives us a model for how we should treat others who look for forgiveness from us: we need to identify with the Father. And we've heard often enough, and *truly* enough, that "I'll forgive but I won't forget" is no forgiveness at all. Are there old hurts in our hearts, people towards whom we still nourish a cold feeling from old hurts. Now is the time to put them to rest. Forgive! Even the resentful son holds a lesson for us. The story doesn't tell us whether the father's entreaty prevailed or not, and it's not a question we can ask of the parable. If there is to be an answer, *we* supply it when we face the

same sort of decision. Let us always do what the father begs his son to do (and what God begs us to do). That is one way to live in the spirit of Lent, the spirit of reconciliation.