

**FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT, YEAR C. Jos 5:9a.10-12, 2 Cor 15: 1-3.11-32, Luke 15: 1-3.11-32**

Today the Fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally referred to as Laetare Sunday. Laetare means "Rejoice." Thus, the liturgy of today focuses on joy. We are called upon to rejoice! This is what is designated by the entrance antiphon, thus recalling the new thing God would do in Jerusalem. We are rejoicing because we are halfway into our journey to redemption; we are rejoicing because of God's mercy that has searched us out of darkness. Reconciliation is the dominant theme in today's readings. The first reading, the Lord says, this day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. This is a movement towards reconciliation initiated by the Lord himself. Paul tells us in the second reading that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. While the Gospel reading presents us with the story of the prodigal son who reconciled himself with his Father. Unfortunately, the vices of vengeance and anger lures the heart of man and woman to reciprocate, seeking to pay back or retaliate at any given opportunity. This has left some Christians to pray to God for punishment for the oppressors. It is like being a monster while trying to curb a monster. We are called upon to embrace reconciliation with God and with one another. We should remember that we have a duty to proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation. The ministry of the Church is a ministry of reconciliation. The Church has the duty to reconcile humanity with God and with one another. We should therefore be channels of forgiveness and reconciliation. We should be apostles of reconciliation.

The Lord through Joshua in the first reading shows his magnanimity in forgiving the people of Israel. Though the Israelites received many provisions from God on their desert journey, manna, meat, and water from the rock, they chose to drink from the wells of disobedience and idolatry thus breaking the covenant with God. The result was that they wandered in the desert and became reproaches of their neighbors. Still, God reached out to them, fulfilling his promises. They at last reached the Promised Land. They ate the produce of the land after the celebration of the Passover. They reached the Promised Land not of their own might and intelligence but by the strong arm of God. What a joy to rest from the travails of the journey through the desert, the response to the psalm invites us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" The Lord always rescues us from all our terrors and sets us free from every distress.

Paul in the second reading emphasizes the need of reconciliation. He knows the precarious life he has lived before. Reconciliation for Paul is not the act of man, it is not the result of the good will of any of us, it is the work of God because it is God who takes the initiative to restore peace. Now that Paul is converted, he is living a new life, he sees this new life not for him alone but for everyone who is in Christ. Anyone who is in Christ is a new being; he feeds on the best not on corrupt ways of life.

The Gospel reading shows the real picture of God. We see here how sin is struggling to destroy our eternal peace with God. Whenever there is something good coming our way, the devil rebrands or recoats vices, making them attractive, pleasurable, and desirable. And then, when one sees these vices coated with shallow and provisional goodness, ill-will, gullibility, pushes one down, and then rationalization sets in. In this parable the younger son though lived comfortably in his father's home but fed on his youthful ambitions rather than his father's love, he decided to leave home. The result was disastrous. He ended up where he even longed to feed on pig feed. But once he came to his senses and returned to

his father, he was fed from the best food, clothing, home, family, happiness and love. The elder brother to the prodigal son expected his father to seek revenge. For him, this is payback time for his younger brother, who disrespected their father. Why would you ask for your own portion of property when your father is still alive and what an effrontery to return and ask for a place to be a servant. These may be the probing questions in the heart of the elder. This is how the poison of hatred is sown in the hearts of those who truly desire to forgive and move on with their lives. There is no gain to construct convincing arguments that would nurture dislike or anger. What we most often fail to acknowledge is that hatred and unforgiveness is eating us up. We are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation and not makers of vengeance and war. Do not forget that "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation," 2 Cor 5:20.

Each time I reflect on unforgiving spirit or behavior I cannot but remember the story of Marvin Gaye and his dad, a minister in the church and strict disciplinarian. The singing career of Grammy award winner Marvin Gaye ended in tragedy on April 1, 1983. He was shot to death by his own father. Gaye's close friend David Ritz wrote Gaye's biography a year later. He called it "Divided Soul." Gaye was indeed a divided soul. He was part artist and part entertainer, part sinner and part saint, part macho man and part gentleman. Gaye's childhood was tormented by cruelty inflicted upon him by his father. Commenting on the effect this had on Gaye, Ritz says of his friend: "He really believed in Jesus a lot, but he could never apply the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness to his own father. In the end it destroyed them both." This is a growing and destructive problem in our society; the inability or unwillingness of people to forgive one another. One of the biggest areas where this inability or unwillingness to forgive manifests itself is divorce, which involves half of our married population. There is a destruction in turning away from God, it leads to death. When the prodigal son turned away from God it led to a spiritual death and wretchedness, but when he made a U-turn, his life was restored. This was possible because of God's readiness to forgive. We should embrace forgiveness and reconciliation as a matter of urgency and necessity.