

Homily Sunday 24C: 15 Sept 2013: HT-W/XII-PC

Among the bitterest sorrows I've seen in ministry is that of a parent who has lost a child. Loss happens in many ways. It may be in the literal sense, that of untimely death. But there are other sorts of losses too. Children leave the Church and are lost to the faith. Others become estranged from their parents and are lost from the network of family ties. Still others are lost to mental illness or a life of crime or go missing in military action or, like the prodigal of the parable, are lost to a life of dissipation. And because the ties that bind the parent to the child run so deep, the sorrow of this loss pierces their hearts w/ dreadful intensity. The holidays and birthdays pass one after another in somber succession. Dismal meditations on the canceled future recur when parents see children of a similar age. The parent sees the child's visage reflected in a crowd, hears his voice echoed in that of a stranger, and expects to find him in the old bedroom or standing at the front door; however much logic may try to suppress the desperate urge and enforce closure, there remains an irrational hope that the lost child may come home again, despite the manifest impossibility of the prospect. It is said that home is where the heart is. Indeed, in every parental heart there stands a home. It is a cozy spiritual abode crammed w/ poignant, vibrant memories, a place where the children enjoy favored quarters. But when the child is lost, an empty space is rent open in the heart, a void that cries out to be filled once more.

These considerations help one appreciate the forgiving father of the prodigal son. (1) His stance of eager watchfulness for the boy's return: he espied his child from a distance, as if he had been waiting for him all those long, lonely years, and ran to embrace him. (2) The tremendous feast that was celebrated to give voice to a joy that exceeded words. (3) The father's dramatic declaration: this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again!

This parable helps one understand the nature of our God and Father. Like a good father, God has a heart for all his children. It is a heart infinite in expanse that can accommodate every human being who shall ever live. As the Lord states elsewhere, in his Father's house are many rooms, each a unique place prepared for everyone. And the divine Father longs that all his children return to him, to take up residence in this heavenly abode. This teaching should be precious solace for us, an assurance that those children who have been lost to us, are not lost to God: nothing, not even death itself, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, as the apostle reminded the Romans long ago. Yet this teaching has another side, a facet that convicts the narrowness of the human heart. We who like to think ourselves good responsible folk, like the elder brother before us, struggle to accept that this teaching also applies to the prodigal. That is, the Father's heart remains open to all, even those who have done dastardly deeds, even those who have wounded us most cruelly thru their transgressions and crimes. The smallness of the human heart is displayed in the refusal to forgive, the denial of a place for those who have offended it. The challenge of this poignant parable is to forgive those who have wronged us, to open our hearts anew to our brothers and sisters that they may return from their errant ways, and to enter the joyous feast of God's reconciling love!