

Homily for March 14, 2010 (4th Sunday of Lent, C)
Joshua 5:9a, 10-12; Psalm 34; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

He grew up as a happy child with two loving parents in Portugal. But at the age of eight, he was taken away under mysterious circumstances and ended up on the other side of Spain. There he was abandoned and left to fend for himself.

He managed to survive by whatever means he could, and at age 22 he joined the army. Having long since abandoned the Catholic faith of his youth, he turned to a life of violence and dissipation. It wasn't until he was 40 years old, after nearly two decades of violence, drinking and carousing, that he began to take stock of his life. Horrified at who he had become, he made a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, perhaps the most famous and important shrine in Spain.

He then decided to return home, only to find that both of his parents had died years earlier, his mother (it was said) of a broken heart. Bearing the weight of so many years of debauchery and now the added burden of his parents' deaths, he experienced profound remorse, which he tried to assuage with all kinds of severe penances. He publicly renounced his sins in the town square and even considered going to North African to offer himself as a martyr. In fact, he was so effective denouncing himself that the authorities were convinced he was mad.

He was sent to an asylum where, in keeping with the limited knowledge and prejudices that prevailed at the time, he was beaten daily with a chain. He was so interiorly wounded that he not only accepted this abuse but welcomed it as a form of penance. Fortunately, however, a famous preacher of the time went to visit him. After hearing the man's story, the priest concluded that he was not mentally ill but rather spiritually sick, overwhelmed with grief and guilt.

After obtaining the man's release from facility, the priest encouraged him to continue leading a life of penance—but one that would be a much more powerful and positive witness. So the man embarked on a life of service. He opened a book store and gift shop that helped raise money for his real ministry: a shelter and hospitality center for the poor, sick and homeless, and travelers of all kinds. At times their numbers would swell to over 100 and he would wonder how he and the ministry would survive. In one letter he wrote:

Since this house is open to everyone, it receives the sick of every type and condition: the crippled, the disabled, lepers, mutes, the insane, paralytics, those suffering from scurvy and those bearing the afflictions of old age, many children and above countless pilgrims and travelers....

And for all this no payment is requested, yet Christ provides. I work here on borrowed money, a prisoner for the sake of Jesus Christ. And often my debts are so pressing that I dare not go out of the house for fear of being seized by my creditors.

Despite so many hardships and obstacles, he continued until his body gave out and he died at age 55. Today a religious order bears his name: the Brothers Hospitaller of St. John of God. The order's motto is simple: *caritas*—i.e., charity or love in action. St. John of God is the patron saint of hospitals, patients and nurses. This prodigal son who returned home then made a home for others.

I sometimes wish there was a sequel to the familiar story of the Prodigal Son that we heard in today's gospel reading. It would be one in which the younger son worked hard and long in thanksgiving for the grace and welcome that his father had extended to him. The older son and his younger brother would be reconciled.

But in reflecting on such a sequel, particularly in light of today's other Scripture readings, I realize that the story I would like written is really about me. After all, I am the one who needs to grow in thanksgiving and to be reconciled with others! St. Paul reminds us in our second reading that in Christ we each are "a new creation." Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into a life of discipleship, which includes "the ministry of reconciliation" and being "ambassadors of Christ." But none of us gets there quickly.

Our passage from the Book of Joshua recounts the arrival of the people of Israel in the Promised Land, signaled by the fact that they no longer had to eat the manna but instead could eat "of the produce of the land." Their celebration of Passover helped them to remember all that they had gone through to get there and, more importantly, the One who had brought them there. We have a similar opportunity each time we celebrate the Eucharist. The Mass gives us a formal opportunity in the Penitential Rite to "call to mind our sins," but it is just as important—perhaps even more these days—to pause to call to mind our blessings! The period of silence after communion is a great time to do that.

Part of the power of the parable of the Prodigal Son is that it is a story that we ourselves could tell. All of us can probably recall a time (or times) in our lives when we have squandered the blessings that received, and it may only have been when we found ourselves soiled by our own mistakes and hungry for something better that we came to our senses, made the decision to "turn our lives around" by turning back to God, and started the long journey back to him.

The good news that Jesus gives us today is that once we begin that journey of repentance, reparation, reconciliation, and renewal God is more than ready to reach out to us and welcome us home. The challenge he gives us is to become more and more like the Father in our relationships with each other, even when our own feelings and even our sense of justice drive us to be more like the older son.

The scribes and Pharisees were scandalized by Jesus' fellowship with sinners. Imagine what they would think if they came to any parish and scanned the pews on any given Sunday! Thankfully for us the scandal of God's grace in Jesus Christ is still alive. May it remain alive—not only for us but *in* us as well! +