

My Dear people of God,

Today we celebrate ***Laetare Sunday***, that is Latin for ‘*rejoice Sunday*.’ In the middle of our Lenten journey, we are invited and given a moment for rejoicing. All the readings this Sunday provide us with the reason for this rejoicing; namely, ***the goodness of God***. The response to the Responsorial Psalm, invites us to simply, “*Taste and See the Goodness of the Lord*.” This goodness is above all expressed in His mercy. The gospel reading today as well as the one for next Sunday present to us vividly the infinite goodness of the Lord as expressed in His mercy to sinners.

The gospel reading today presents us with one of the best known and loved parables of Jesus, ***the parable of the prodigal son***. It probably could even be better referred to as the “***Parable of the Loving Father***.” It has been said that the entire gospel message and mission of Jesus is contained in this parable. Tons of books have been written on this parable and above all, many lives have been touched and transformed by it. The core message of the gospel and mission of Jesus is summed up in one verse in the Letter to the Romans: “...***God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us***” (Romans 5.8). This core message is illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son in today’s gospel.

The parable of the prodigal son reveals to us what is required of us to tap into the goodness of God so that we can rejoice. First and foremost, we must know and realize that the reason for rejoicing is the goodness of God our Father. God is good All the Time! In Baptism we were born again and became God’s children. As we all know, once a child always a child. The prodigal son knew this! Secondly, the prodigal son only had to acknowledge his failure, and humbly return to his father who would receive him with open arms. That is what we call **repentance**. All it takes for us to experience God’s love and mercy is repentance (the core message from last Sunday).

The parable of the prodigal son is regarded by some as being unfair in favor of the wild son and to the disfavor of the faithful older son. The younger son seems to get away with murder! But in reality that is what mercy is all about and all of us need mercy. No wonder the Psalmist in Psalm 130 says: ***If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities (our sins), O Lord, who could stand..?*** Some have also argued that this parable enables bad behavior. But that is far from the case.

The prodigal son behaved badly- there is no doubt about it and it needs to be said. The parable does not hide it. The gospel reading states that: ‘*he came to his senses*’ and that says a lot: it not only reveals that he came to a profound awareness of his sins and failures, but also of the pain he had caused to his father, that is why he went on to think he no longer deserved to be called a son (of his father). This is a true manifestation of repentance, a turning away from sin and return to goodness.

The prodigal son deserved to be punished, he knew it and even asked for it. Yet as we all know, in that state punishment is the last thing one needs. In fact, he had already received his punishment when his friends deserted him and in the hunger, loneliness and degradation to the level of pigs that he had experienced. This is what God does for us when we repent and turn

away from our sinfulness. In His goodness, God welcomes us back with open arms, cleanses and renews us.

My dear brothers and sisters, this parable by no means gives us a license to sin. Rather it shows us that if we do sin, we can and should come back to our loving and merciful Father. Our past can be overcome and we can make a fresh start. This is a great lesson for us today. Therefore as we embrace this second half of the Lenten season let us like the prodigal son, with confidence approach our loving and merciful Father.

God bless you,

Fr Simon Peter