

Homily Lent 4C: 10 Mar 2013: HT-W/XII-PC

This famous gospel of the Prodigal Son, also called that of the Forgiving Father, is among the most poignant in literature. It may be so poignant that the lessons get lost in sentimentality. I wish to focus on a few points it teaches about sin, repentance, and forgiveness, esp. since our own parochial Penance Service is scarcely a week away.

The younger son, the prodigal, is the obvious sinner in the story. He gets into a lot of mischief--a "life of dissolution" in Luke's pregnant phrase; later on the older brother in older brother fashion supplies details about what this dissolution involved. But the most fundamental sin is not his dissolute lifestyle or prodigality. Rather, the basic transgression is leaving home. He deserts his family. By demanding his share of the inheritance, he says that his father is effectively dead to him. But by severing familial ties, it is the son who finds death . . . almost. The younger son wants to escape the old home with its chores, rules, and family tensions. He wants to enjoy the freedom from parental constraints that adulthood brings. It is this self-imposed exile from home that engenders all the other sins.

One crucial lesson is that sin involves running away from God's house, that is, the Church. For the Church is where God the Father abides. The Church is where the grace of God is in the air. God's Word is proclaimed and heard, his grace is communicated in prayer and sacrament. God the Father's house is not an easy or perfect place, mind you. Membership here does involve rules for behavior and responsibilities to the community. It does require enduring the dysfunctional human dynamics that arise from the sins of the household members. But without the Church, folks are cut off from the rich treasures of grace which are conveyed through the all too human yet for that very reason approachable channels of minister and sacrament. By stepping outside the Church, we risk losing our identity as God's children.

Another lesson is about repentance, contrition, and forgiveness. The younger son comes to see the error of his ways after the money runs out and he falls into misery. His contrition involves remembering that he still has a father. Please note his motives are not so noble. He's starving and thinks he can still get 3 hots and a cot at daddy's house! Even his rehearsal of the speech to give his dad sounds contrived. He shows no sorrow for hurt inflicted on his father, shame brought to the family name, or burdens imposed on the rest of the household by his desertion. In classic Catholic language, this is called imperfect contrition. That's where you repent your sin because you're afraid you'll go to hell. It's different from perfect contrition where you repent sin because it offends God. The good news is that imperfect contrition is good enough. When the father sees his son far off, he runs to embrace him. It's a touching image of what happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Even though a penitent may have mixed motives for Confession, God's reconciling love makes up the difference. In fact, the hope is that the sacramental experience of God's compassion will be so inspiring that it may move the penitent from

imperfect to perfect contrition. After receiving such gracious forgiveness from our Lord, we forget ourselves and grieve for offending him.

One final lesson about forgiveness is offered by the somber figure of the elder brother. He is the forgotten son of the story who doesn't appear until the end and doesn't get much attention. He really is a sympathetic character. After all, he's the one who does his duty. He stayed home and probably picked up the slack when little brother skipped out. He's keenly aware of the misery this prodigal's misadventure cost the family. He likely intuits that his kid brother's contrition has selfish motivation. Moreover, he probably suspects, not w/o reason, that after junior gets his belly full w/ fatted calf, he might get too big for his britches again. I think a lot of us here are like the elder brother. We do our duty by God and his Church. We're here on Sunday. We support the Church out of our resources. Yet we know there are some folks running around who wear the Catholic name but don't come, don't contribute, and don't live by the laws of the Lord of the house. And because they don't do their part, our part in the Catholic enterprise is a lot heavier than it needs to be. So it's easy to get resentful when they return and crash the parish party. We must listen carefully to the words of the forgiving father and remember that, however much these folks' follies have hurt us, they've hurt God a whole lot more. After all, he's the one who died on the cross for their sins. God's willing to forgive and welcome them back into the family. So should we. Otherwise, we may find ourselves stuck outside in the cold.

At every Eucharist, we pray that our Father forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Let's pray that the grace of this celebration may move us to penance for our transgressions and to forgiveness for those of our brothers and sisters.