

March 31, 2019 Swine Homily: “And after he had spent all, there came a mighty famine in that country: and he began to be in want. And he went and cleaved to one of the citizens of that country. And he sent him into his farm to feed swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, and nobody gave him any”. (Lk. 15:14-16)

Early in my childhood I was introduced to an old English fairy tale by one of my grade school teachers. Sometime later I was delighted to see that the story had been adapted as an animated feature and often turned up on television Saturday mornings. If you are of a certain age, you may recall “The Three Little Pigs”. Unlike the big, bad wolf, the pigs are cute and appealing animals. The same could be said as well for one of the lovable characters from the “Looney Tunes” cast, namely, Porky Pig. He had a distinctive voice, unlike any other in the pantheon of cartoon characters. As a child, I simply could never conceive of such a beloved figure as part of my diet of bacon or ham.

In high school, I was assigned to read a dystopian novel by the English author, George Orwell: “Animal Farm”. Among his memorable characters are four clever and conniving pigs that, together, conspire to start a revolution on a farm. Their names are Napoleon, Snowball, Old Major and Squealer.

In the cultural world of Our Lord, pigs were considered repulsive and “unclean”, and not cute and loveable. In one of Jesus’ most celebrated parables, the parable of the Prodigal Son, a young man, having squandered his father’s inheritance, takes a menial job as a herdsman in a pigsty. In the local culture this was the lowest form of earning a living. The young man is destitute and is likely at the end of his rope. As a means of survival, he reluctantly agrees to work for slave wages. For a Jew listening to the words of Christ, it was especially shocking. To eat the very food fed to swine was not only an act of desperation, it was also sinful. The young man had reached rock bottom. No Jew was permitted to raise pigs. Not eating pork became a test of fidelity to the Law of Moses. In the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, we read, “Of their flesh you shall not eat and their carcasses you shall not touch. They are unclean for you”. In the parable, the Prodigal Son is forced to have contact with animals which his religion branded as unclean. A relevant rabbinic saying is apropos in view of this parable: “When the Israelites are reduced to eating carob pods, the food of swine, they repent”.

From the beginning of the parable, we are told why the young man suffers many indignities. He wants to live only for himself, free of any other claim. A false autonomy leads him to slavery. He eventually comes to his senses and realizes what he has lost. Living far away from home is the beginning of his fall from grace. Having undergone a deep and profound inner transformation, he then decides to return home. Returning to his father represents a homecoming. His father has good reason to celebrate.

In his encyclical, “Rich in Mercy”, the late Pope John II offers some wise reflections on this parable. In the words of this Pontiff, the figure of the father reveals to us God the Father. He is faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the love he had always lavished on his son. “Even if he is a prodigal,” the pope writes, “a son does not cease to be truly his father’s son; it also indicates a good that has been found again, which in the case of the Prodigal son was his return to the truth about himself”.

We may wish to ask ourselves a few pointed questions. First, have we squandered God’s gifts? Do we take umbrage at the generosity of the father once his wayward son has returned home? Are we more likely to identify with the disgruntled older son, who scolds his father for showing mercy to his younger brother? Do we recognize the need for conversion this Lenten season?

Traditionally, the fourth Sunday of Lent is known as “Laetare Sunday”. The Latin word “Laetare” means rejoice. In the parable we have good reason to rejoice. The heartwarming scene of reconciliation is a favorite of some of the world’s greatest artists. As we draw closer to Easter, Let us pause for a moment to give thanks to God for his patience, his understanding, and his mercy.

Amen!