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LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2014

THE CROSS AND THE PRODIGAL SON: GOD'S MERCY REVEALED

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:

*May grace and peace be yours in abundance through
knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord*

(2 Pt 1:2)

As we enter the Holy Season of Lent, reflection upon God's mercy leads us to repentance and reconciliation with God and one another and promises true rejoicing at Easter. Jesus uniquely taught about God's mercy in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). This parable gives us insight into God's merciful will to save because it is a lesson in what Jesus perfectly expressed by blotting out our sins through his own Passion, Death, and Resurrection. May our meditation lead us to lift our hearts in prayer with the words of Sacred Scripture: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead* (1 Pt 1:3).

[1] Between the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem lies the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Here, according to the prophet Joel, God will judge the entire world (cf. Joel 3; 4, 19). From ancient times, many pious families have buried their dead in this valley in the hope of the resurrection from the dead on the Day of Judgment.

[2] Among the many tombs crowding this cemetery is the Tomb of Absalom. This Hellenistic burial monument, rising 47 feet above the valley floor, is clearly visible. History, legend and custom make this tomb stand out from all the others.

[3] Absalom, the third son of King David, was his only son with royal blood from both his father and his mother. His good looks and charm won him the favor of his father and the admiration of the young aristocrats of the royal city. But his life was anything but favored.

[4] Absalom's story reads like a sordid tragedy of human weakness: lust, incest, deceit, grief, rage, revenge, rebellion and betrayal. When David failed to take revenge for the rape of Absalom's sister Tamar, Absalom took matters into his own hands. A leader with great charisma, he led a revolt against his father, but failed. David's general, Joab, killed him in battle. His death caused David profound grief. With loud sobs and laments, he cried aloud, "Would that I had died in place of you. O, Absalom, my son, my son" (2 Sam 18:33).

[5] The broken heart of King David but faintly mirrors the wounded heart of the Father who never ceases to

LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2014

love us when we rebel against him by our sins. That which David could not do, God did. On the Cross, Jesus, who is truly God, took our place and died for our sins so that we might live.

[6] Over the centuries, there developed a curious custom around the Tomb of Absalom. Jews, Christians and Muslims began to bring their unruly children there. They would make them throw stones at the monument of the son who had raised his hand against his father. Thus, parents would give their children an unforgettable lesson of the fate of children who rebel against their parents.

[7] From the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, we know that the Tomb of Absalom was well known in the first century. On his visits to Jerusalem, Jesus passed by it many times. No doubt, he saw it with his eyes and remembered in his heart the famous passage in Deuteronomy that speaks about the fate of a rebellious son.

[8] That passage says: “If someone *has a stubborn and rebellious son* who will not listen to his father or mother, and will not listen to them even though they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders at the gate of his home city. There they shall say to the elders of the city, ‘*This son of ours is a stubborn and rebellious fellow who will not listen to us; he is a glutton and a drunkard.*’ Then all his fellow citizens shall stone him to death. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear and be afraid” (Dt 21:18-21).

[9] This law is harsh. But, in the context of the times, it was an expression of justice. In ancient societies, the father was the law. In fact, in the *Code of Hammurabi* (n. 168, 169), the father had absolute power over his son’s life. Not so in biblical law. The father could not be judge, jury and executioner.

[10] A father whose relationship with his son had gone bad could not simply do away with him. Along with his wife, he had to bring the case before the elders of the city. Since the elders certainly would have been familiar with both the parents and the son, they were in a position to limit any harm that an angry father would be tempted to inflict on his son. Thus, the law actually was a protection of the rights of a son accused of rebellion.

[11] Jesus knew Deuteronomy. He quotes it in his teaching more than any other Old Testament book. He certainly knew this passage very well, for he uses it as the raw material for his poignant Parable of the Prodigal Son. Whereas Deuteronomy had moved parents away from anger and revenge to justice, Jesus goes beyond justice to mercy.

[12] In Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15), the younger son squanders “his inheritance on a life of dissipation” (v. 13). He swallows up “the father’s money with loose women” (v. 30). He is “*a glutton and a drunkard,*” just as Deuteronomy describes.

[13] When the younger son demands his share of the inheritance, he is not merely asserting his youthful independence. In the culture of the time, the inheritance passed on to the sons at the time of the father’s death. A son demanding his share *before* his father’s death was publically declaring the father as good as dead. As St. Peter Chrysologus, says “The son is weary of his father’s own life. Since he cannot shorten his father’s life, he works to get possession of his property.”

[14] Selfishly taking his share of the inheritance, he leaves home. He is thinking only of himself. He rejects the communion of life and love that should exist between himself and his father. In the words of Deuteronomy, he is truly “*stubborn and rebellious.*”

[15] With a heavy dose of self-pity, the elder brother in Jesus’ parable acknowledges the enormity of his brother’s rebellion. Disowning his younger brother before the father with the phrase “this son of yours” (v. 30), he echoes the words of the parents in Deuteronomy disowning their rebellious son before the elders with the words “*This son of ours.*” Every sin we commit, even our most secret sin, diminishes our relationship with one another. Every member of our family suffers when we turn away from God. The rebellious heart directed away from God is never simply a personal matter with individual consequences alone.

[16] In the prophet Hosea, God says of his rebellious child Israel, “How could I give you up...or deliver you up? My heart is overwhelmed...My pity is stirred. I will not give vent to my blazing anger. For I am God and not a man” (Hosea 11:8-9). In the father of the prodigal son, word becomes deed.

LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2014

[17] When the younger son returns home, his father sees him coming from far off. The father has been anxiously hoping for this moment. His eyes have grown weary, searching the horizon for his son. He runs to him, overjoyed.

[18] The son does not come back, groveling before his father, pleading for forgiveness, as expected. No! The father runs to meet his son. He casts aside his own dignity. Showing his love is more important than insisting on honor. What a powerful statement about God!

[19] God is pleased to reckon the forgiveness of our sins as his honor. When God forgives, it is not for anything in us. Rather as he says through the prophet Isaiah, "It is I, who wipe out, for my own sake, your offenses; your sins I remember no more" (Is 43:25). God forgives our sins in his great love for the sake of his own name (cf. Is 48:11). We do not merit God's love. We accept it.

[20] The law of Deuteronomy required the rebellious son to be stoned to death at the city gates. Thus, the father hastens to reach his son while he is still away from home. He holds on to him in love so that the others are not able to carry out what the law demanded in justice. God's mercy always goes beyond what justice requires and grants forgiveness to the repentant. Our contrition may not always be perfect, but God's love is!

[21] The father embraces his son, holding him close to his heart, kissing him again and again as would a mother showering affection on her child. What a great image of God that Jesus gives us! God transcends our categories. He who is Father has within his bosom a mother's heart. Jesus knew well the words of the prophet Isaiah, "As a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you." (66:13). Lamenting Jerusalem and our sinful hearts, he said, "how many times I yearned to gather [you] together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were unwilling!" (Lk 13:34). God yearns for our repentance. "Repentance raises again the fallen soul, lifts up the destitute, heals the broken" (St. John Chrysostom).

[22] Driven by an emptiness in his heart more painful than the gnawing hunger in his stomach, the prodigal returns home. He rehearses again and again his painful confession: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers" (Lk 15:18-19). His father's joyful embrace cuts short his well-prepared speech. He no longer asks to be treated like a hired servant. In God's eyes, we are more than servants (cf. Jn15:15). In baptism, we put on Christ and truly become his children.

[23] When we tarnish our dignity as children of God by our sins, the Father is ready to clothe us again in his grace through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. However, just as the prodigal son, we need to confess our sins. We are body and spirit. We live by word and deed. We have the need to be seen and to be heard. We need to say our sins out loud to the priest and to hear the words of forgiveness spoken by him in the name of Jesus. As St. Athanasius teaches, "Just as a man is enlightened by the Holy Spirit when he is baptized by a priest, so he who confesses his sins with a repentant heart obtains their remission from the priest."

[24] It is not so much that God cannot forgive us without confession to a priest. Rather, he has given us this great sacrament precisely to meet us in our humanity. Whether we sin like the younger brother, grievously separating ourselves from God, or like the elder brother, separating ourselves from others, frequent confession opens us up to the love of God and helps us to appreciate that we are members of the family of God and not isolated individuals.

[25] The same love that the Father shows the younger son, he extends to the elder brother. To his selfish insistence on his own rights, the father tenderly gives a gentle reprimand. He invites him to be seated at table, celebrating the joy of being one family. He waits for his response. He waits for ours.

[26] Taking our place at the Lord's Table! Being part of the family of God! This is where our observance of Lent leads us. During the forty days of Lent, we deepen our prayer, practice fasting and increase our works of charity (cf. Matt 6:1-18) to prepare for Easter. On that solemn Feast of feasts, we gather, with the newly baptized, to join with Jesus in his Passion, Death and Resurrection. Through the Paschal Mystery, Jesus, makes real in our lives the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

[27] As Jesus enters his passion, he leaves the Last Supper. He walks across the Kidron Valley with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. In the full light of the Passover moon, his eyes come to rest upon the Tomb of Absalom. He remembers the law of Deuteronomy. According to this law, the elders of the city are to

LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2014

carry out a death sentence for the rebellious son who was “a glutton and a drunkard” (Dt 21:20).

[28] “A glutton and a drunkard.” So Jesus’ enemies have labelled him. His ministry has been so different from that of the Baptist. No fire. No brimstone. But, mercy and forgiveness. To those meticulously keeping the law, he has said, “The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matthew 21:31). And so they complain, “Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Mt 11:19). They judge him the rebellious son of Israel. For, in their eyes, he has squandered the rich inheritance of the law on sinners.

[29] Jesus knows that his life on earth is about to end on the cross. Three times during his public ministry, he had predicted it (cf. Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34). At the Last Supper, he interprets the meaning of his impending death. He is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, who takes on himself the sins of others (cf. Is 53:8). As St. Paul says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:21). Jesus is all of us, the prodigal, empty, beaten, and stripped of dignity, because of our sins.

[30] Recognizing what was ahead, Jesus enters the Garden of Gethsemane. He prays beneath its gnarled olive trees, even as the elders, with a twisted sense of justice, plot to put him to death. The weight of our sins crushes him to the ground. But, he rises with purpose and courage.

[31] Jesus goes to the Cross, taking upon himself our sins. He is the Son who knows the infinite mercy of the Father who says, “This son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found” (Lk 15:24). His road to Golgotha is the way to glory. And so Jesus “humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:8-9).

[32] The Cross of Jesus is the return of the Prodigal Son, all of us, into the home of our Father. For, in the arms of the Crucified Christ, we encounter the Father who runs to meet us. He embraces us with his love, even as we try to utter our words of repentance. His love overwhelms us. He invites us to the Eucharist. Seated at our rightful place at the table of the Lord, we already share in the eternal banquet of the Lamb, slain and raised from the dead, where one day we will know a joy that never ends.

Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson, on Ash Wednesday, the fifth day of March in the year of Our Lord, two thousand and fourteen.

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