

FIRST READING: Joshua 5:9a, 10-12

A reading from the Book of Joshua:

The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you." While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month. On the day after the Passover, they ate of the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain. On that same day after the Passover, on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7.

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth. Let my soul glory in the LORD; the lowly will hear me and be glad.

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Glorify the LORD with me, let us together extol his name. I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame. When the poor one called out, the LORD heard, and from all his distress he saved him.

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians:

Brothers and sisters: Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 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.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them Jesus addressed this parable: "A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided

the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "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."' So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began. Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'"

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 4th Sunday of Lent C

The passage from Joshua began with a curious turn of phrase. He told us that God would remove the reproach of Egypt from them. What is reproach? Reproach can be internal and external. Internal, or personal, reproach can be defined as having shame. External reproach can be defined as disapproval of someone else. Why would God be disapproving of God's people? Why would God's people feel shame? This is Lent. Is this situation caused by people's sin? Perhaps.

However, the book of Joshua gave the statement a context. It was due to slavery in Egypt. The generations between Joseph and Moses had been born as slaves. God's people have just entered into the Promised Land. They were all now free. God's has fulfilled the promise to Moses of a land filled with milk and honey. They have a home. God has saved them from slavery. God is their God and they are God's people. The covenant is firm in reality; the promise fulfilled.

Were the Hebrew people responsible for their own enslavement? According to the book of Genesis, they arrived in Egypt as a result of a famine. They migrated from Palestine to Egypt in search of food. They were refugees. It turned out that their tribal chief, Jacob, also known as Israel, had a son who was a high official in the court of Pharaoh, Joseph. Joseph had anticipated the famine and advised Pharaoh to prepare by store-housing grain. Pharaoh welcomed the refugee tribe of Hebrews as honored guests.

Pharaoh eventually died and a new prince became Pharaoh. He, “knew not Joseph,” and feared these new, foreign people. To become true Egyptians, in ancient Egypt, meant to adopt the customs, dress, language and religion of the Egyptians. The Hebrews could adopt all but one of these. Their God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel. They fiercely believed in God. They refused to believe in the Egyptian pantheon. Thus the Hebrews remained somehow foreign. The Egyptians feared them and enslaved them. Their slavery was not the result of their sin but of their fidelity to God. For this, God raised up Moses to lead them to freedom and the Promised Land.

Yet, the manna has ceased. Is this a punishment for the reproach of God’s people? No, the people can now partake of the Promised Land’s produce. This new food was part of the blessing God had just bestowed on God’s people. I have to admit that eating unleavened bread and parched grain does not sound very appetizing though. I happen to like matzo. Dried grain can break your teeth. Dried grain, not moist, green grain produces flour for baking. Think rice. Wheat can be cooked and eaten as rice can. This is a story of God’s bountiful providence and the people’s gratitude. The people celebrated the first Passover in the Promised Land and fifty days later, the first Shavuot, Pentecost or Feast of Weeks as God’s people offered the first fruit harvest of spring.

This passage celebrates the freedom, bounty and providence of God. This is the Jewish equivalent of our Thanksgiving. God may have provided manna, but now has provided a land that produced nourishment for God’s people. Slavery has ended. The wandering is over. God’s people are home. God’s home is among and within God’s people. People’s lives now have a new context; new life in a new land.

The response has said, “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.” To see the goodness of the Lord makes sense, we can see the hand of God all around if we stop to see it. Why taste? For taste to have any significance, one must savor it. Taste is something we can take for granted. What we call taste encompasses at least three of our senses. Our tongue can actually taste sweet, sour, bitter, salt and fat. Smell provides much more. Try holding your nose while eating. We detect hot and cold by touch. I like hot sauce. The burning sense that one gets from capsaicin is a sensation that affects the entire body. God wants our senses to be filled with God’s presence.

In this light, a savory meal can become a prayer when God is most near. When people offered food to God as an offering, tithe or sacrifice, the roasted food fed people. It was cooked, shared and eaten by God’s people not cremated. God has no need for any food. What went to God was the aroma of cooking, the presence of people gathered to worship and the resulting feasting together afterward. God is very near in those moments of a shared meal. This is also the context of our mass. It is God’s way to seek deeper intimacy as we gather together. A host, the precious body and blood of Jesus, may have a very low caloric impact, but we do share and eat it together when we worship. Our roots of faith and worship have sprouted from these deeper Jewish roots.

What’s the difference the Psalm makes between God’s radiance in us and being filled with shame? One is blessed and holy in God’s presence. Not to know God’s presence is shame. Since God never left the Jewish community and never leaves us, is shame ever possible? We can feel far from God, but since we live by faith and not our feelings we know the truth of God’s promise; God is a mere thought away. To live in God’s presence is to know God’s salvation through forgiveness of our sin. God frees us to live anew in God’s life.

For Paul, Jesus' death on the cross has saved us once and for all from death and sin. Our faith in God and in Jesus is the sign of our salvation. Yet, we continue to sin and God continues to forgive us. Salvation is an ongoing process that unfolds as we live. Because of what Jesus has done, dying on the cross, God's gift of salvation is effective in our lives. As we live, Paul tells us, we become ambassadors, witnesses of Jesus. We may not always be aware of our witness because salvation comes from God and not us. God works through us whether we are aware or not. God's mindful intentions guide us. We don't guide God. God remains near, always.

Paul was, in New Testament literature, a prolific writer. A reader of Paul's Epistles will note the progression of his insight, thought and faith. He wrote, today, of his search for and journey to Christ. His is an on-going and ever deepening relationship with Jesus, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. We can get caught up in the story Luke gave us in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul was knocked to the ground, saw a great light and heard a disembodied voice. We attribute this singular moment when Saul the bounty hunter and hit man became Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles.

When we read Paul's letters, he tells a much different story. In his description, his conversion took years. He received instructions, formation and guidance. He was also plagued by memories of his past. He spoke of the thorn in his side; he killed people who believed in Jesus. For this reason, the apostles in Jerusalem sent him on a mission to the Gentiles; they didn't fully trust this man. He began his work, far from the Church's center in Jerusalem. It was only after Paul's work of service and preaching took root and after Paul was persecuted for Jesus that the Church in Jerusalem came to see him as an equal. This is what Paul's words today reflect. He was a sinner, just like us, and needed the salvation won by Jesus just as we do. Through his faith, Jesus forgave his sins. That's the lesson for us.

Luke's gospel was written, as Luke has told us, for someone named Theophilus. This could refer to an individual or, as its name implies, one who loves God. Some scripture scholars think of Luke's gospel as a tool of Christian formation used in the process of initiation for those coming to faith. I like this vision of Luke's text. I have worked for many years with the RCIA or Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. One great tool I've used is to get people to reflect upon their lives and experiences. Our movement to faith is a process of discernment. Today's parable is an opportunity to do so.

Luke has set Jesus' parable within a context. People in need were drawn to Jesus. The Spirit led them. They were sinners and needed healing and forgiveness. We are all sinners by nature of our shared humanity. But sometimes we can feel that we are not. This can lead to the delusion of self-righteousness. Only God is righteous. When we feel righteous we become like the scribes and Pharisees. So, Jesus speaks to each of us as we read this gospel and never to those who don't. We are the recipients of Jesus message and lesson.

What does prodigal mean? Who is a prodigy? It's usually a very gifted and talented young person. When we have a prodigious day we have accomplished much. Our progeny are our children. I like to start with these notions as a basis for interpretation. It speaks of a gifted and generous nature. There are three characters in the story and each can be called prodigal; the younger son, the elder son and the father. The younger son is full of himself and rude. For him to demand his share of his father's estate implied that the old man was dead. He wasn't, of course.

He then went off and lost his wealth, all he thought he had. He still had his father's love but didn't know it yet. This led him to his moment of prodigy. With his choice to return home he faced his empty purse, stomach and heart. His emptiness was the true gifted state of his life. In hitting bottom he knew all he needed; to seek his father's forgiveness and to accept his own wretched state. He knew that his return and his profound profession of guilt, shame and emptiness might move his dad to forgive him, at least enough to get a good meal and a job. He became the Prodigal Son when he chose repentance as his path.

The father was prodigal from the beginning. He agreed to the arrangement in the first place. He loved his son that much. Not only that, he remained vigilant for his son's return as soon as he left home. He knew that his son would return. He was always the Prodigal Father and focused on mercy, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation. He caught sight of his son's return and ran to meet him. He forgave his son from the start.

Even before his youngest's confession, he had the shoes, ring and robe ready. This was his son and never a servant. The ring is the symbol of authority. The shoes are the symbol of being a son in good favor. The robe belonged to the father and was the symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation. With these gestures and gifts, the father showed that all was well, again. His son was home, with him and where he belonged.

Then there's the business of the fatted calf. It would feed a hundred or so people. Why kill and roast it for a single household? It wouldn't be a feast if those hundred people didn't gather for it. This was not just a "family affair." This was an occasion for the whole village to share in the father's joy. They would know the good news and celebrate too. This was a happy, joyous time! Except...

There was the elder son. He wouldn't, couldn't forgive his brother. I've always wondered, he did not speak up or protest his brother's demand or his father's action. What went through his mind? Did he want his brother out of his life? Did he really hope his own flesh and blood to die in slavery and of starvation? Jesus told his story from a Jewish perspective. Certain elements would have been revolting to anyone faithful. Servitude to a gentile reversed the Exodus. Pork is tasty and available meat to Gentiles and forbidden for Jews. The pigs' fodder was also forbidden for Jews to eat. Mere tending the pigs and not feeding on them or their food showed that as a Jew, the younger son was faithful to God, at least. Was there a hidden malice within the elder son? He certainly showed he had a strong self-righteous streak.

He, however, maintained his gifted status. He never left his father's side. He never lost his home and status as the first born and heir. All the father had was his; except for one thing. He did not share his father's joy and delight with his brother's return to his father's grace. Instead he chose to focus on what he felt he'd lost. Would a feast with his friends and more of his father's praise really have made a difference to him? He was also filled with judgment and envy. They masqueraded as his concern for his father. He was also jealous of his father's prodigious love; he wanted it all for him self. In that he was also a Prodigal Son.

In these two lads, if I am honest, I see myself. How many times have I made poor choices? How often have I needed reconciliation with others? How often have I sinned? I am like the younger son and need the Father's forgiveness; the Father being God. Yet I can be judgmental. Self-righteousness is also my stumbling block to living faith. I can hold grudges. I am as human as those two. My challenge from this gospel is how I can become more like the father and share the gifts that God has given me.

We know the reconciliation between the father and his younger son. We know that it was complete. We've witnessed the depth of the father's love for the elder son. We've listened to the father's impassioned plea. That's where the story ended. What happened next? If Luke intended this to be a tool of formation for those coming to faith, was the elder son's response the one he wanted to evoke? I suspect that his non-ending of the story was to engage us and evoke our response as the elder son. What would you and I do next?

May God always run to meet us and welcome us into new life.

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