

"Pardon, Mercy and Reconciliation" [2 Corinthians 4:16-6:2; Luke 15:11-32] January 28.18
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Today's Gospel is one that is familiar. It is a family story. The younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, squanders it and then returns home as a wretched and broken person, asking his father's forgiveness. His father welcomes him back with a great show of tenderness such that his son might get the feeling that his dismal return was actually a favour to his father. That is authentic pardon, making the recipient feel as if he is the donor. But however much this story may please us it has some shadowy corners as well. We readily identify this father with God and we wonder if He might not be too quick to show His love and mercy. His facile mercy seems almost as if it encouraged wrong doing and resignation to it.

Then there is the third person, the older son. He is furious and scandalized by his father's apparent lack of understanding of what constitutes justice. We too feel that his efforts have not been properly recompensed. He has always been faithful to his father's authority and has never caused vexation. He has persevered in carrying out the duties of his own station in life. He puts in his personal complaint, "*you never gave me so much as a goat to celebrate with my friends.*"

In this Gospel message the elder son is not the only one who is scandalized. So are the scribes and the Pharisees who cannot stand Jesus' attitude. Jesus claims to speak in God's name and yet he "*welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" They on the other hand are true and faithful servants of God, observing the letter of the Law of God down to the last details, yet He spurns them. These men are angry, and we can understand their very human feelings. When we think about it, we confess that our reaction is similar.

We are amazed that the father repays his older son so poorly and that Jesus deals so badly with God's generous servants, the scribes and Pharisees. It is to them that Jesus directs the parable of the father and his two sons. It is in answer to their shock at seeing Jesus hobnob with publicans and sinners and tax collectors. We are completely satisfied by this father who welcomes back his prodigal son with tenderness and lavish festivity. So far as we know our frailty and have had the sad experience of failing in some way, we are pleased by God's unfailing pardon as we have witnessed in our own lives. That is the first message of the parable.

The second message is the one that astonishes and upsets us even though it flows logically from the first. If the eldest son had readily, without reproach; if he had fully embraced his father's way of thinking; if he too had lived the same high quality of love, he too would have rejoiced because of his younger brother's return home, even after his dishonourable conduct. If the older son does not rejoice over this, if he makes comparisons and seeks personal vindication, then he lacks love and does not love. This is Jesus' response to the Pharisees and to us as we share the outlook of the Pharisees.

Jesus wants the presence of our merciful Father to be evident in the world. His response is an invitation to us to change our way of thinking. It is addressed directly to the Pharisees, the first ones to hear this story and today it is addressed to us. Our spontaneous outlook is framed in terms of our ideas of justice. We want good to be rewarded as it

deserves. And so far as evil and wrongdoing are concerned, particularly in the case of others, we may not go so far as to demand that they be punished but at the very least we do not want them to be rewarded as seems to be the outcome in this parable. We have an idea of what we think is fair and in this teaching the good son seems to get shafted.

The Lord invites us to switch to a mentality based on mercy. It is the only constructive outlook. It is normal to rejoice over good and take delight in it. It is also normal to rejoice if something or someone that is part of us, was lost and wants to come to life again and comes to ask God to restore them or that which was squandered. Reflecting on the Gospel message, we note a curious thing. In his mercifulness Christ does not appear to be a protector or an accomplice. We do not detect any degree of complicity with evil in his mercy for the sinner. How is this possible? And how can we manage that?

In the text, Jesus bears witness to the Father of mercy. He is and chooses to be, fully at one with the tenderness and mercy of the Father for all humanity, for those poor souls who know they are sinners. But as the text from Paul's letter to the Corinthians indicates, he is also at one with the sinner towards whom *"He shows such mercy."* Paul says: *"For our sakes God made him ... to be sin."* It is not that Jesus became guilty of wrongdoing. What it means is that He took on our sins; He made himself "Sin." He lived the mentality of the sinner to the utmost, feeling what it was like to yearn for purity, to be lost and looking for the right road, and to be dead and looking for life again. The twofold solidarity or fellowship is necessary. If He had merely been merciful, Jesus and God along with him would simply have been a protective father who did not really respect the object of his love. If He had merely been "Sin," He would simply have increased the power of death and would not have been able to correct this state of affairs. He would have proposed perfection, not a transformation. This twofold role is one that only Christ could have taken on. In him God became, "Sin," while remaining pure mercifulness. He can transform us and lead us to, *"the very holiness of God."* This holiness is not grounded on a "balance of power" relationship, but on the fruitfulness of love. In human history, Christ who is Man and God is the only one who is able to live this twofold fellowship to the fullest. But how are we to attain this merciful outlook which the Lord urges upon us in his teaching?

In the Epistle we commended you to read with the sermon notes, Paul teaches that we are ambassadors for Christ: *"God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, has given us the ministry of reconciliation."* On the basis of this remark and what we see in the Gospel, we can say that every believer, like Christ, lives a life of mercy in terms of a twofold fellowship, but he or she lives it in a different way. The ministry of reconciliation is to a sinner in whom God grants mercy. He/she manifests the mercy of the Father, *"not his own mercy."* So they call others to live the same reality that they live. They are a pardoned sinner whom God sends out to proclaim pardon to others. Therefore, the ambassador is not at one with the sinner to whom he/she transmits mercy, because they know that they cannot attain nor do justice without the Lord's help. No one can feel superiority over another. Such a person is also at one with God's mercifulness because they seek only the full flourishing of the life that God gives. Therefore, it is impossible for them to be the sinner's accomplice. And they rejoice when a lost person is found, when a dead person is resurrected, because they desire everyone live the reconciliation with the Father affected by Christ.

This is how the kingdom is built up. The process is illustrated by a text from Joshua (5:9-12). When the time of their sojourn in the desert was over, the Israelite nation was settled in the Promised Land and was from that time onward, nourished on the products of the new land. Those who benefited from the Father's mercy and who continue to benefit from it every day make up the new people of God. They are established in a new life. Their frailty and their dependence on the Lord means that they remain in close fellowship with all human beings, but at the same time they live with a completely different outlook. They cannot go back to the old way of thinking any more than the Israelites wanted to return to Egypt, and we know they certainly did not want to go back. The kingdom is the community of the weak ones. They are at one with human beings as they are sinners; at one with God because they have been pardoned. If the community should come to feel superior to others, then it would espouse the Parasitical religion of the strong and it would no longer be grounded on mercifulness. If it should enter into complicity with the frailty of others, then it would suffocate their desire for resurrection and stunt their search for truth. It would lose its authentic brand of fellowship and replace it with a superficial intimacy.

Now we realize that the closer we feel to the reactions of the father's older son, the farther we are from understanding God's mercy. Let us pray that He will give us clear insight into ourselves so that we may be able to live the mystery of reconciliation embodied in the whole of humanity as it is represented to us in Christ.

Prayer: Almighty God, your Son Jesus has followed us into the far country of our disobedience. We thank you that even now He is guiding us back to you where forgiveness awaits and gladness resounds. Receive us and revive us O God, in Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.