

Rich in Mercy

Fourth Sunday of Lent - Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

Ave Maria Catholic Church, March 27, 2022 - Fr. David M Vidal

In Christ and through Christ, God becomes notably visible in his mercy. Jesus makes mercy one of the principal themes of his preaching. As is his custom, he first teaches "in parables." With these examples, he wants to enlighten those who listen to him: the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32) or the parable of the Good Samaritan, (Lk. 10:30-37) but also—by contrast—the parable of the merciless servant. (Mt. 18:23-35) However, He does not only speak of mercy by using comparison and parables, but above all, He himself is mercy.

In the parable of the prodigal son, even though the word "mercy" does not appear once, it clearly shows the essence of divine mercy.

The son receives the portion of the inheritance from the father and leaves home to waste it in a far country "on loose living." In a certain sense, the prodigal son is every person from every period, beginning with those who first lost the inheritance of grace and original justice, our first parents, Adam and Eve. The parable touches upon every violation of the covenant of love, every loss of grace, every sin, every misuse of God's gifts.

In this drama of the father and the son, we can direct our attention to the son. And we can ask: what were the things that the prodigal son lost?

They were not only material possessions or the material food of his father's house. The son lost a number of material goods inherited from his father, but more importantly, the son lost his dignity as a son in his father's house. Then, he became aware of the loss of that dignity.

It is the tragedy of lost dignity, the awareness of the despised sonship. And he makes the decision: *"I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"* (Lk 15:18-19)

When he decides to return to his father's house, to ask his father to be received—no longer by his right as a son, but as a hired servant—at first sight, he seems to be acting because of the hunger and poverty that he had fallen into; however in this motive there is an awareness of the loss: To be a hired servant in his own father's house is certainly a great humiliation but it is a consequence of his poor decisions.

The prodigal son is ready to undergo that humiliation and shame. His decision is taken in full consciousness of what he deserves and of what he can have by the norms of justice.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the term "justice" is not used even once; just as in the original text, the word "mercy" is not used either. However, it becomes evident that love is transformed into compassion when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice.

Fidelity of the Father

The father of the prodigal son is faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the love that he had always given to his son. This fidelity is expressed in the parable not only by his immediate readiness to welcome the son home when he returns after having wasted his inheritance; but it is expressed even more fully by that joy, the feast, and the celebration for the son after his return, a celebration which is so generous that it provokes the opposition and hatred of the elder brother.

The father's fidelity to himself is at the same time expressed in a way that is particularly marked with affection. When the father saw the prodigal son returning home, *"he had compassion, ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him."* (Lk 15:20)

However, the causes of this emotion must not be considered superficially. The father is aware that a fundamental good has been saved. The father's words to the elder son reveal this: *"It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found."* (Lk. 15:32). These words of the father describe the grace of conversion: coming from death to life, from being lost to being found.

Christ is the Parable of the Father

Jesus himself is the "Parable of the Father" full of grace and truth (cf. Jn 1:14), by which the Father reveals himself with great mercy. (Cf. Eph 1:9-10). Jesus, our brother, told us to call God "our Father," and he taught us that the Father so loved the world that He sent his only Son for our redemption.

The Father so loved us "that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (Jn. 3:16)

Then, Jesus comes to us, takes the cross, and walks towards Calvary for our salvation. In the cross of Christ, we perceive mercy. For our salvation, He is on the Cross, and even though He doesn't suffer any more after his death and resurrection, He did suffer for me and gave himself up for me.

From that day on, mercy is seen every time a person is baptized, receives the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and unites to Jesus in Holy Communion. Then, we can truly say with the psalmist: *"I will eternally sing the mercies of God,"* (*Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo*), (Ps 88 [89]:2).

The parable of the prodigal son invites us to discover the gifts that we received from God and our dignity as His children. It teaches us to be grateful for the gifts received and mindful of the responsibilities that come with them. We are stewards of God's blessings.

The second important lesson is that we must be merciful. In the same way that the Father is merciful with us, by sending His only Son for our salvation, we must be merciful with others. If we ask forgiveness for our trespasses, let us forgive the trespasses of others. If we desire compassion and understanding of our shortcomings, we must also treat those who fall short in their actions towards us with kindness.

May our Blessed Mother, the Mother of Mercy, help us be closer to Jesus. May we accept God's mercy in our lives and show mercy to others. Amen.