

## Fourth Sunday of Lent C - The Value of Our Inheritance

March 30, 2025

This Sunday is **Laetare Sunday**, it is the fourth Sunday in the season of Lent. Traditionally, this Sunday has been a day of celebration within the period of Lent. This Sunday gets its name from the first few words (*incipit*) of the traditional Latin entrance verse (Introit) for the Mass of the day. "*Laetare Jerusalem*" ("Rejoice, O Jerusalem") from Isaiah 66:10. The particular joy of this Sunday is the joy of knowing that reconciliation with God is in our grasp. As ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we are called to let it be known that the love of the Forgiving Father is always there for those who need to hear that despite their actions, they are still lovable. We perform the work of God by leading them to be reconciled with God. We have each been entrusted with a great inheritance, a portion of the Promised Land. We have each been entrusted with the mission of reconciliation, bringing our unique reflection of the Forgiving Father to those who long for someone to say, "Come home. You are forgiven."

This Sunday's Gospel reading is Jesus' best-known parable, and perhaps the greatest story ever told. It tells us practically everything we need to know about our relationship to God, if we but attend to the details carefully. The younger son asks for his share of the estate and quickly squanders it in a faraway land—and so it always goes. We are the children of God; we have been given life, our being, everything by him; we exist through him at every moment. What is represented here so vividly is the moment of sin caused by greed and its consequences of shame and starvation. But it also tells us about the virtues of humility and repentance as the young son coming to his senses at last, he decides to break away and return to his father. The father sees him from a long way off, and then, throwing respectability to the wind, he comes running out to meet him. The Bible is not the story of our quest for God, but of God's passionate, relentless quest for us. He puts a ring on his son's finger, symbolizing the reestablishment of a right relationship between us and God.

We have all heard the story of the Prodigal Son many times. I would like to look at the parable in what might be a different way to help us comprehend the depth of God's mercy. People move about quite a bit. Few people die on the same property where they were raised. The ancient Hebrews were not attached to their property for sentimental reasons. Far more, they saw their land as a gift from God, as their portion of the Promised Land. When the Exodus from Egypt ended and the Hebrews defeated the Canaanite, Hittites and other people living in the Promised Land, they divided up the land among each family. Since the Promised Land was given to them by God, then the property of each family was a share of God's gift. So you can see the heavy weight of the Prodigal Son's sins. As the younger of two brothers, he had the right to one-third of his father's property, after the father died, of course. He and his brother were expected to work the property for their father while he was still alive. But the younger son wanted his inheritance immediately. He then sold the property and took his money to a foreign country where he squandered everything. So, he didn't just sin against his father, he sinned against God.

It is the father who dominates the story with his eagerness to dole out prodigious love to both offspring. No matter what had happened, the sons will always be his sons. So he received him back with open arms and gave a banquet for his lost son. Sadly, the elder brother was not so forgiving and excluded himself from the banquet of the Father's love. This elder son, a complainer, speaks multitudes about human nature and how easily envy, jealousy and resentment arise when other people are treated well. This elder son might never do anything wrong in his life but his hate and bitterness caused his father much grief. The father in the story is someone whose love never changes and is present all the time as much when the young son goes off as when he returns. He also tells his older son that he is with him always and all that is his belongs to the son as well. That's where the gospel story tells us something about the gracious goodness of God - his warmth with sinners and the length of his merciful arm. God never changes. Somehow in a way beyond our understanding he knows the weakness, the waywardness and the perversity of the human heart and makes allowances. His love for us remains; he is always willing to forgive. He is always with us. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether we are aware of God's ever presence in our lives, whether we are humble enough to ask for his forgiveness whenever we sin, do we actually know how much God loves us and do we really understand His love.

We are sons and daughters of God. We each have an inheritance, a portion of the Kingdom of God. We have been given the life of the Gospel, eternal life. When we sin, we commit an offence against Jesus Christ, God the Son, who gave us his life. That is why there is no such thing as an inconsequential sin. Every sin wears down or destroys the life of God we have been given. Every sin is a sin against our inheritance. Added to this every sin, even hidden sins, affect the Body of Christ, for when one part of the body hurts the entire body hurts. "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you." The Prodigal son recognized the twofold weight of his sin, against God and against his father. We need to do the same. We need to recognize the weight of our sin, against God and against his people. And we need to realize that when we repent, our loving God, our Forgiving Father, continually picks us up and celebrates our returning to him. And we need to proclaim to the world the great mercy of God. In this Sunday's second reading, St. Paul tells the Corinthians that just as we have been reconciled to God through the Blood of Christ, we have been entrusted to bring the ministry of reconciliation to the world. We are called ambassadors to represent Jesus Christ. The Forgiving Father does not sit back looking at our waddling in the pig slop and say, "Well he got what he deserved." No, he longs for us to come home.

We need to hear the message that God forgives us and calls us to his banquet of love. If we are honest we can see shades of the elder and younger sons in ourselves. We have been wandering, disobedient and selfish children who hold grudges and are unwilling to forgive one another. We have forgotten our ever-loving Father who even after our most stupid mistakes and tragic sins is always ready to welcome us with open arms. Yet there are so many people who have given up on themselves. We know them. Perhaps they are one of our brothers or sisters, one of our friends or neighbours, one of our children or grandchildren who have decided that they are going to eternal damnation which they have well earned. Their actions seem to worsen every day. They have given up trying to conquer evil in their lives. They have let evil conquer them. They need us, you and me, to say to them, "Do not give up! Be reconciled to God. He has not given up on you. He is standing at the door of his house, looking across the field, waiting for his prodigal son or daughter to come home. You have hurt yourself in many ways, you have hurt other people, people who loved you, but God has not given up on you. He still loves you. Come home. Come home to God the Father."

My most generous Lord, You are compassionate beyond what I can fathom. Your mercy and goodness far exceed what any of us deserve. Help me to be eternally grateful for Your goodness and help me to offer that same depth of mercy to those in most need. Jesus, I trust in You.

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#### Note

A chance encounter with a reproduction of Rembrandt's *The return of the prodigal son* catapulted Henri Nouwen \* on a long spiritual adventure, leading to the writing of his book with the same title on the themes of homecoming, affirmation, and reconciliation which will be helpful to all who have known loneliness, dejection, jealousy, or anger. It's a beautiful book written with wisdom in simple clarity, well-worth reading.

\* Henri Jozef Machiel Nouwen (1932-1996) was a Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer, and theologian whose books on spirituality, particularly his emphasis on relationships, solitude, community, and compassion, have sold millions of copies.