

## **Homily for 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent Year C**

**By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD**

**Readings: Josh 5:9-12; Ps 33(34); 2 Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-3,11-32**

**Theme: The Lost and Repentant Son**

The context of the gospel today is the criticism of the Pharisees and Scribes against Jesus' welcoming of sinners and eating with them. Jesus, in response, tells them three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In all three parables, something is lost and is found. In our gospel, although popularly known as the parable of the prodigal son, we could also see it as the parable of the lost and repentant son.

The boy demanded from his father the share of his estate, that is, the property that rightly belongs to him. He asked for a share of his inheritance even while his father was still alive. He took his properties, went to a distant country and squandered his money on reckless living. Going to a foreign country symbolizes a deliberate choice to go away from God and from the land which belongs to his father, symbolic of the Promised Land. Therefore, he chooses to go into exile. He was not forced into exile. He left his own country, his own house, where there was plenty and moved outside his father's house, the Promised Land.

In the first reading, the people of Israel rejoiced that they left Egypt and entered the Promised Land, where they celebrated the Passover, eating the produce of the land. But the young man moved from the promised land to Egypt, a symbolic place of suffering and forced labour. This exilic condition is clear from what follows. God says to Joshua, 'today, I have taken the shame of Egypt away from you.' He delivered his people from the hard labour and shameful life that the Egyptians had subjected them. But the young man in the gospel goes into that shameful life in an attempt to have his freedom.

He hired himself out to the local inhabitants. He subjected himself to forced labour, a recurrent theme in the land of Egypt. Then he worked in a pig farm and would have wanted to feed on the pig's husks, but no one gave him. The Israelites were forbidden to touch pigs because they were unclean (cf. Deut 14:8), just as they were to separate themselves from other nations not to defile themselves (Lev 11:7). Taking care of pigs was bringing himself to the lowest point. He moved from grace to grass, from righteousness to uncleanness. That is what sin is, a deliberate choice to abandon the love of God to do our own will.

In his exilic pain, he came to his senses. He decided to return to his father, this time, to be treated as a paid servant, no longer a son, because he had lost his right in the house by taking all that belonged to him. It is here the character of the father comes in. The father had been offended, disregarded and poorly treated. But he always stood in the expectation that his lost son would be found or, better still, will find his senses. When the father saw him, he was moved with pity, ran to him, clasped him, kissed him. He was not interested in the rhyme the son had prepared. Instead, he put the best robe on him to restore his dignity as a son. He put a ring on his finger to seal their relationship again and put sandals on his feet to restore him to righteousness. Above all, he gave a feast to celebrate a lost and found, a dead and back to life son. During Lent, the story of this young man reminds us to stay at home with the Lord and eat from the table the Lord has prepared for us. We must seek to do our Father's will rather than our own will of independence from God.

But the story presents another character of someone who is not concerned about the return of the lost child. One who was concerned about the evil he had committed and the punishment he deserved. The elder son has never been lost from the house. He was always externally faithful to his father. Yet, his heart was far from that of his compassionate father. How compassionate are we towards those who have lost their faith? Or those caught in the web of sin and evil? Do we pray for them to be restored to faith, or do we judge, condemn and wish them dead?

In the second reading, St. Paul tells the Corinthians about the compassion of God, which made God reconcile himself to the world through Christ. God did not hold our faults against us but reconciled us to make us ambassadors of Christ, agents of reconciliation in the world.