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A homily for the 4th Sunday of Lent

Date: Sunday, March 31, 2019 | **Season:** Lent | **Year:** C

First Reading: Joshua 5:9a, 10–12

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 34:2–7 | **Response:** Psalm 34:9a

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:17–21

Gospel Acclamation: Luke 15:18

Gospel Reading: Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

Preached at: the Jesuit Institute and the St Martin de Porres Catholic Church in Orlando West, Soweto in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Our readings this Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Lent, speak of coming home. St Paul in our second reading speaks of Jesus appealing to us to be reconciled with God. The Jews, after their wanderings in the desert after leaving Egypt and being sustained through the manna from God have returned home and stand at the threshold of Israel where they eat from what their new land, Canaan, provides them. They are no longer nomads in the desert but have come home to their promised land.

When we reconcile with someone, we both gain a deeper understanding of the other. Perhaps the stereotypes we had in our mind of them are challenged and we gain a more authentic realization of that person. We grow in relationship with them.

Our Gospel for this Sunday also speaks of a coming home. It is the familiar story of the Prodigal Son. But all too often, we forget why it was that Jesus spoke this parable to the Pharisees and Scribes. You'll recall that they had exclaimed that

‘This man’, Jesus, ‘welcomes sinners and eats with them’. Jesus is accused of being welcoming and eating with those he welcomes. I think this is a key to understanding the correct focus of this Parable. You see, the one who does the welcoming and “eating with” in the parable is the Father.

I know it can be tempting when we hear this Gospel to identify with the younger son in the story. He’s broken the rules, been rebellious, abused freedom, hurt loved ones, hit the road, squandered his savings, given up on faith and religious community, gone to a different country... there are many that can, and do, identify with that. Who see parts of their life story in that description.

On the other hand, there are those who might identify with the older semi-prodigal son, who kept the rules, and lived the obligations. Many still might see themselves there.

But, as significant as those resemblances might be, I think it is the Father who bears the image of God that Jesus is trying to share with the Scribes and Pharisees, both of whom have an image of God that is judgmental, concerned with legal duties and the like, which was why they could not understand Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them. Jesus is saying to us that we are most like God when we welcome home our children. So, let us call this Gospel story, not the Prodigal Son, but the Welcoming Father. And when we too allow those we love to come home, and be reconciled, the two themes from the 1st and 2nd readings, we will be like the Father.

So perhaps this would be a good time to ask yourselves – what is the picture of God that you have? Perhaps it is not a picture. Perhaps it is a feeling, or a sense, or perhaps God appears to you as a sound. The more we pray, the sharper and more in focus our image of God becomes and thus the better able we are to relate with that God.

If we reflect on the Father in the parable – bearing in mind that, if you agree with me, that is what Jesus is trying to communicate here – I think we might encounter this familiar text with some new eyes. So I invite you to consider the

parable not from the position of the sons – as relevant as that might be this Lent – but rather to learn from the Father by considering how he behaves.

In the beginning the younger son asks for his inheritance – an act that is akin to saying he wishes his father was dead to him so that he could inherit – but notice what the Father does. The Father freely gives what the son asks for. This is a double freedom – there is the freedom of the Father to freely give, and there is the freedom for the son to ask the Father. From the beginning we are shown an example of a relationship with the Father that is totally free. The Father does not try to control his son's life. This is because we know that in any relationship that is not free, where there is manipulation, control or unfreedom – there cannot be love in that relationship. The father never stops loving the Son. When we turn away from the Father, similarly, which we are free to do – and sadly do often – the act of our turning away does not stop the Father from continuing to love us.

Now let's look at the younger son who, perhaps while flush with money lived a high life – some translations say a debauched one. It is perhaps similar to any young life where newfound independence and boundaries are tested. Mistakes are made. It's reasonable to assume, I think, that when the money dried up – so did his so-called new friends. And we're told that he is reduced to working with pigs. The son of the Father who had servants and land is now doing the one thing that no good Jewish boy could ever contemplate – he is caring for swine. Not only has he left his home and family, negated his father, and squandered what the Father freely gave him – but the tragedy's lowest point is described when the younger son denies his religion. His debauchery that led him to prostitutes resulted in him becoming a godless apostate.

After all of this, we read that 'he comes to his senses'. This is a wonderful phrase and is perhaps the key to understanding the importance of homecoming. He comes to himself. He realizes that he has run away from everything at home, and even run away from himself. But now he comes to his senses and begins the homeward trek. He knows that he has to speak to his Father, and so he even prepares a speech, asking that he is treated as a servant, because he feels so unworthy.

Isn't that us when we sin – we think we are so unworthy that we forget our sonship with God and reckon only to be a servant, but this is the wrong image of our relationship with God – because servants are not free, they are bound by duty – but the image of God that Jesus shares with us in the father of this prodigal son is one that refuses to accept that.

Jesus tells us that the father is watching and waiting. We're not told for how long. We could imagine that it was from the moment the son left. The father never gave up. And while the Son was a long way off, his father saw him and we're told was filled with compassion for him. From the distance we're told that the Father recognizes his child we're told he does three things, he runs to his child, he embraces his child, and he kisses his child. After seeing his son returning, there is no room in the Father's heart for judgment, but only joy and compassion. This is a father who is filled with love for his son.

The image of the Father running to his son is described quickly, but if we think of an old man running – you can begin to get a sense of how strange that must have been for the Scribes and Pharisees listening to Jesus at that time, because old men should not suffer the indignity of having to run anywhere – yet the Father runs to the Son. And when he arrives does not lecture him or say 'I told you so', or that 'you should have listened to me'. No, there is no recrimination or punishment. Only an embrace and a kiss. The Father accepts the Son as he is. He does not wait for anything else. The only sign from the Son is that he is desiring to return home – in fact the Father meets the son on the way home, he does not even wait for the Son to arrive fully.

The son then tries to begin his prepared speech and be a servant but the father interrupts him, and calls his servants and tells them to bring the best robe for his son (notice how he does not ask the son to wash first – a common practice at the time – no – his reinstatement is immediate). He also gives his son a ring. This is significant because the image of the ring represents commitment, faithfulness, it says you belong!

When we return to God, God's love for us, and his ways of telling us that we belong will be no less dramatic. Very often in the confessional one can witness such profound reconciliations.

But notice what the son tried to do. He tried to say his speech which effectively was saying he wanted his past to determine his future. But that is not how the father wants things to be. The father does not allow the son's past to determine his future.

We do the same, don't we? So often we define ourselves by what we did in the past; and we define God by what we knew about God in the past – but God does not want that. He wants a living relationship in the present, that is just joyful and welcoming and compassionate for each of us.

But Jesus does not end the story there. He wants to show the Scribes and Pharisees, and ourselves, another side of the Father, in how he deals with the elder son.

In some ways the elder son is the opposite of the younger son. He is the one who has kept the rules, he's behaved. But even though he's been 'good'... do you sense like I do that the elder son is unable to share in the Father's joy because he is unable to be joyful.

Pope Francis has often said that joy is the sure sign of a relationship with God. The elder son has kept the observances of society and religion, but has failed to allow his heart to love. His heart has become hard. At least the younger son loved too much with the prostitutes. He seemed to follow his passion wherever it led him – even though we see it led him away. With the elder son, there was such control over his life that he could not allow his heart to feel love and joy.

Notice what the Father does to the elder son. He pleads with him to celebrate that what was once lost is now found, what was once dead is now brought back to life. This pleading to celebrate the life, is as much for the elder son as it was about the younger son. Can the elder son celebrate life.

In celebrating life we become grateful and gratitude for life and joy in life are the two foundational states that we as Christians should have. That is why Jesus is telling this parable to the Pharisees and Scribes and it is only people who are grateful and joyful who can truly welcome home those who are lost, and eat with them.

We're not told what happens to the elder son. Perhaps that is deliberate because all of us can be that elder son – the one who has tried to keep the rules, attend Church. We love our children, but can we welcome them as they are. Can we embrace those who are estranged to us? The father's embrace is perhaps best shown in Jesus' life, in his openness to sinners and tax-collectors, but also in his death, as he stretches his arms out on the cross to embrace the world. The father does not want to exclude his children. Jesus does not want to exclude anyone from the Father's love.

Could I invite you now to consider how welcoming you are in your life?
Especially to people you might notice as wanting to come home.

Look at your image of god, and see how it compares with that of the Father in the Gospel this Sunday.

We're called, this Sunday, to correct our image of God, so that it matches more closely the Father in the Gospel story. This is the image of God that Jesus gives us. The father who wants to put a robe, the finest clothes that can cover any shame. He wants to put a ring on you, and in so doing say 'you belong', 'you are mine', 'you are precious to me'. The father who says come now – just as you are. He wants to welcome you and renew you.

That's Jesus' image of God. That's the Father to whom he asks us to pray.

Let us this Lent give thanks for such a loving God, and ask the Holy Spirit to give us the grace to be as welcoming and loving to the people in our lives, as God is.

Amen.

Source: <https://sj.mcharlesworth.fr/homilies/2019-03mar-31-yc-lt-04/>

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