

# Sunday Homily 27 MARCH 2022/YEAR C

## 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT

“He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him.”

### Illustration

Joe knew that he'd done wrong. He was allowed to play football in the garden. But this time the game with his friends had been a bit too exciting. And they'd ended up by trampling all over the new flowers that his mum had carefully planted only a few days before. Joe was really worried about what his parents would say to him. But when his mum saw the tears in his eyes and the sorrow on his face, she simply wrapped her arms around him. "Oh Joe," she said, "I know you're feeling sorry. But you know I love you more than I love those flowers." Joe told himself that he wouldn't be so careless again.

When good parents forgive a child some fault, they do so completely. Any half measures will leave the child unable to move on, still wondering whether it is worth trying to be good, and maybe failing again. When we forgive our children their faults, our forgiveness has to be total and unconditional; when we forgive in this way we mirror the love and forgiveness of God.

### Gospel Teaching

Our three readings speak in different ways of the immense generosity of God. The book of Joshua tells of the new life God gave to the people of Israel when they escaped from slavery in Egypt and entered the Promised Land. Here is described how they finally reached maturity as they ate the produce of the land and no longer relied, infant-like, on the heavenly manna. There, at last, they had the opportunity to live with hearts open to God. We know, however, that the attempt failed. The nation continued to sin and could only be restored to a right relationship, reconciled to God, by the Father giving his unconditional love in and through the death of Jesus.

In our second reading, Paul uses the verb "to reconcile" five times as he explores the depths of the forgiveness Christ has won for us and the implications of the new life which that brings. We are, he says, "a new creation"; God does not do things in small measure, half-heartedly: "in him [Christ] we... become the goodness of God". What a gift! What an immense calling! You and I in union with Christ can now act towards the world as "ambassadors", able to speak with others in the name of the Lord himself. We are not distant shadows of the reality, but God's intimates, sharing God's life, truly God's representatives.

The well-known tale of the prodigal son should be seen in this way. It is not fundamentally a moral story about someone fallen on hard times who pulls himself together. No, it is all about the reconciling love of God the Father. God in the story is represented by the father, and we are the prodigal son. It is not a story of

justice either, for the young man doesn't deserve the forgiveness he receives. He has treated his father as if he were dead by demanding his inheritance in advance, and then added insult to injury by wasting it in a way that utterly defiled him and shamed his family. The father's outrageous love for his son is shown in the new identity he gives to the returnee: costly clothing, a ring denoting citizenship, and sandals, all signs of status and respect. As if this were not enough, he lays on a lavish banquet as well. The parable is talking about God's attitude towards us in just the same way that Paul does: "God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them."

### **Application**

There is a challenge here too, made clear when we reflect on our previous Lenten Sunday readings. The temptations of Christ prepare him for his radical ministry of reconciliation, while the transfiguration shows us the glory that is to be revealed in Christ. We too are at a crossroads: we can, like the elder son, stick with the tired old ways and reject the Father's offer of new life, just as Israel did time after time – or we can act with grace and humility in response to the Father's overwhelming generosity. What is it to be?

This tale is not just about individual choices, but also about how we live as a Church. Forgiving others is probably the hardest thing any of us will ever be called to do, yet without it we cannot live, either individually or corporately, as the new people of God, as images of Christ.

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