

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent (C)

6<sup>th</sup> March 2016

'The Greatest Parable of Mercy'

Josh 5: entry into the promised land  
through Christ ...

2Cor 5: *God reconciled us to Himself*  
Lk 15: 1–3, 11–32: the prodigal son

It's no surprise to me that Pope Francis has called this Year of Mercy in the year when the lectionary for Sunday — our readings at Mass — draws its Gospel passages primarily from St Luke; no surprise at all. Almost all the great parables of mercy come in Luke, and from start to finish his Gospel reads like a hymn to mercy: from the *Magnificat* of Our Lady in ch.1 (“His mercy is from age to age on those who fear Him”); to the appeal of St Peter at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry (“leave me, Lord, I am a sinful man”); to the final moment of Jesus’s Passion on the Cross, forgiving the repentant thief (“today you will be with Me in paradise”). St Luke mediates to us the words of the Saviour who is all-merciful.

And the Year of Mercy hinges, I would say, around this very Sunday Gospel today: the greatest parable of mercy in St Luke, and the most famous: ‘The Prodigal Son’ also known as, or perhaps *better* known as, ‘The Forgiving Father.’ I would like to suggest that this Gospel passage,

on this mid-Lent *Laetare* Sunday, in the middle of the entire Holy Year, is the centrepiece of the Year. If we understand this parable, and if we live its message, then we cannot go wrong in life. The mesmerising array of fine detail in this parable leads us to know and understand God our forgiving Father so much better. There’s no getting away from the clear message given by Our Lord as He paints a detailed picture of the Father. Particularly poignant for me, in this parable are phrases such as: “While he was yet *at a distance*, his father saw him” ... “He *ran* and embraced him” ... And the way in which the father *interrupts* the son; notice how he never lets him complete the prepared little speech; he cuts him off.

Let’s remember: this is not some man-made image of God. This is not some hoped-for laxity on God’s part that we think up to get us off the hook for our wrongdoing. No, this is the authoritative teaching of the Son of God Himself. What He says is true, therefore: this is what God is like! He is in fact a *merciful* Father; He watches out each day longingly to see, ‘Is this the day my son returns to

Me?’ / ‘Is this the day my daughter turns back to Me?’ Then, the very moment we make a move, come to our senses, turn around to face the Father once more after turning our backs on Him in sin, there He is, already running towards us; not waiting for us to approach fearfully into His awesome presence, but running along to the road to meet us. We make our confession, but He cuts us off before we grind ourselves into the ground in guilt and despair; He lifts us up in hope, reinstates us as sons and daughters, restores us to our baptismal dignity. Jesus was the one who lay down repeatedly in the dust of the ground, on the way to Calvary; He is the one who has been crushed by our sins — He has suffered that for us; He doesn’t expect us to have to do that all over again; so the Father quickly and without great inquisition lifts us to our feet again, re-clothes us in our festive, baptismal garment, washed and made clean.

This is the reality; this isn’t some figment of our imagination: this is the word of the living God; this is the nature of God, to be merciful and constantly to extend to us

that hand that lifts us to our feet without humiliating us. Pope Francis reiterates this in his beautiful document which announced the Holy Year:

*Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 9: In the parables devoted to mercy, Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy. ... In these parables, God is always presented as full of joy, especially when he pardons. In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon.

And all of this explains the final part of the parable, the response of the merciful Father to the indignant elder son, the one who refused to welcome back his wayward younger brother, and who resisted sharing in the joy of his return. We cannot hold on to grudges; we cannot allow ourselves to be imprisoned by a refusal to forgive: life is too short for that, and life given us by God is not designed for that! The elder brother also needs to learn from the merciful Father, just as much as the younger brother.

This Year of Mercy, then, has two dimensions that are necessarily interlinked: the mercy we seek from the Father; and the mercy we need to show to one another. We

cannot have — or expect — one without the other, any more than we pray merely in the *Our Father*, “Forgive us our trespasses ...” No, we pray in the *Our Father*, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We have to learn both the lessons of this parable: the lesson of being forgiven; and of forgiving. Both are lessons that aren’t always easy to learn, given our insidious pride; I think that they take a lifetime of learning, and of repeatedly hearing the Gospel to learn. But what a joy and a blessing for human life if these lessons of mercy are learnt! This is the joy that is at the heart of the Church’s ‘*laetare*’ today — her joy at God’s great mercy!