

God Awaits Our Return

Josh. 5: 9a, 10-12; Ps. 34; 2 Cor. 5: 17-21; Lk. 15: 1-3, 11-32

‘Bless me Father for I have sinned...’ These seven words, which begin the Sacrament of Reconciliation, are very significant because they reveal a contrite heart that has recognized sin and is turning to God to be reconciled to Him. In the words of St. Paul from the Second Reading, they signal the desire of the penitent person to allow God to make of him ‘a new creation’, not counting his sins against him.

Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the barrier between God and us, due to our sin, is torn down. God no longer remembers our sin. Yet, even though reconciliation with God is so desirable, many people have great difficulty approaching the Sacrament. They struggle under the weight of their sins but they cannot bring themselves to enter the confessional. Why is that?

Many people say that they have no problem confessing their sins to God directly in the privacy of their rooms at home but they worry that, when they unburden themselves to the priest, he will think poorly of them because of what they have done. They believe that the priest is seeing them at their worst.

On the contrary, years ago, I heard a priest say that, when someone comes to him in the confessional, he is not seeing them at their worst. Rather, he believes that he is seeing them at their best. He admires their courage, contrition, and openness to the mercy of God.

This is the beauty of the Parable of the Prodigal Son that we encounter in the Gospel for this Sunday. In the parable, the young son disowned his family. By asking for his inheritance, he essentially said that his father was dead to him. But when he had wasted all the money and was down and out, he resolved to turn back to his father and ask his father to take him back, not as a son, but as a hired hand.

But the father would have none of that. When he saw his son approaching from a long way off, he rushed out to embrace him. He put fine clothes on him and shoes on his feet signifying that the son had been restored to full membership in the family. And then the father arranged for a feast to celebrate the son’s return.

When the older son heard the sounds of the feast, he became angry wondering: Why does my brother get a banquet after all his sinning and I have received nothing when I have been obedient? His father came to him and gently tried to make him understand the reason for the celebration; that the younger son had been dead and had come back to life; had been lost, but now was found. Or as St. John Chrysostom put it: ‘Not for his wickedness, but his return home; not for sin, but for repentance; not for evil, but for being converted.’

As we continue on our Lenten journey, let us give up our pride and our fears and avail ourselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation so that we may be freed from the burdens of our sins. In the First Reading, we read that God provided manna to sustain the Israelites as they faced the hardships of the desert. In the same way, He has given us the Sacrament of Reconciliation to help sustain us as we journey through our desert of life in the world. Let us not be afraid to turn to God and say: ‘Bless me Father for I have sinned...’ He is waiting for us and wants to celebrate our return.