

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 30-31, 2019 *Your brother was dead but has come to life.*

Readings: Joshua 5:9a, 10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Only twice in the entire three-year Sunday cycle are we able to hear from the Book of Joshua. It is considered the first of three historical books, opening with the commissioning of Joshua. Joshua is the figure who took over, for Moses and Aaron, both of whom were prevented from entering the Promised land.

The reading begins with the Lord noting that he had removed the reproach of Egypt from the people. The verse immediately before this indicates that it had much to do with the Israelites forgetting their Jewish customs while wandering, including the customary ritual prescribed for all male newborn babies. Much more than a lament for a forgotten ritual, the reproach signals the dangers of forgetting who we are as people. What could we learn from this episode?

What have we forgotten about our Catholic history and customs and culture? I submit we have forgotten much, though I see positive signs of recovering much of it. Once we all acknowledge that our rituals, customs and traditions are not ends in themselves, we can discard once for all the tired complaint that we are missing the forest for the trees.

We are not. Saturday confessions, Stations of the Cross, Forty Hours devotions and the parish Lenten Fish Fry to name a few, allow us to gain a sense of common identity as Catholics. Why would we desire to meld in so much with our contemporaries as to be indistinguishable?

While we no longer observe Jewish rituals customs for the most part, the use of ashes being a notable exception, much in the Catholic liturgy that provides and fosters a catholic ethos. Catholic sacred music is a priceless gem, linking people across generations, speaking to the heart. Liturgical seasons draw us in with a comforting repetitiveness.

Laetare Sunday is but another example of a Catholic custom worth preserving. We rejoice even in the midst of our long Lenten fast. Today, we see small signs of joy in the rose-colored vestments, the bright flowers, the organ prelude and postlude (absent the rest of the season) in the midst of Lent. Thus, the contrast between Laetare and the other Sundays is emphasized, and is emblematical of the joys of this life, restrained rejoicing mingled with a certain amount of sadness.

The reason for such display of joy is explained in a sermon by Pope Innocent III (1216):

“On this Sunday, which marks the middle of Lent, a measure of consoling relaxation is provided, so that the faithful may not break down under the severe strain of Lenten fast but may continue to bear the restrictions with a refreshed and easier heart.”

It is also an appropriate day on which to hear this parable, arguably Jesus’ best-known parable. A common element unites the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, all of which are told in succession in Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel.

What does the shepherd who finds the lost sheep and the woman who finds her coin have in common? They both say “Rejoice with me!” And what does Jesus say at the end of each parable? “There will be more joy in heaven for a converted sinner than for ninety-nine just people who have no need of repentance.”

The entire fifteenth chapter has as its common theme that of rejoicing in God’s mercy and beneficence in our lives. This parable is about *joy*, the joy that comes from knowing God’s love. That joy does not cover over the reality of sin; rather when we are repentant, it removes the guilt of sin and fills our souls again with grace, enabling us to be true sons and daughters of God. Far from questioning the motives of Jesus, we are tremendously grateful for his overflowing love and mercy.

The welcome that Jesus reserves for sinners is well documented, just as is the opposition that this engenders on the part of the defenders of the law who accuse him of being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). Recall, Jesus declared “I have not come to call the just but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Feeling welcomed and not judged by him, sinners listened to him gladly.

But we must step back for a moment and ask ourselves who it was that was included in this grouping of *sinners*. Before we assume that it referred to the hardened enemies of virtue, moral reprobates who behaved shamelessly, we ought to pause for a moment.

Nowhere does Jesus condone the slightest transgression of the moral law, but he does challenge the excessively narrow interpretation given to it by the Pharisees. They clearly thought all others to be outside of the truth who did not agree with their interpretation.¹

What Jesus condemns is the Pharisees’ relegating to themselves the determination of true justice and their denying to others the possibility of conversion. On the contrary, the father throws a feast for his son precisely because he recognizes his sin, and because the lost sheep was found. The son recalled the greatness to which he had been called.

Through our desire for daily conversion, especially during the Lenten season, may we too, recall the holiness of life to which God has called us, as well as make use of the rich customs and traditions our Catholic faith affords us in our journey of faith during Lent.

¹ In fact, Jesus is more rigorous than his adversaries. If they condemn adultery, Jesus condemns adultery already at the stage of desire; if the law says not to kill, Jesus says that we must neither hate nor insult our brother or sister. To the sinners who draw near to him, he says “Go and sin no more,” not “Go and live as you were living before.”