

Homily for Laetare Sunday
March 5-6th 2016

Joshua 5:9a, 10–12
Psalm 34:2–7
2 Corinthians 5:17–21
Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

(Fr Jonathan Gibson)

There is a delightful pun at play in our Old Testament Lesson today.

The People of Israel have just come to the end of the Forty Years Dessert Wanderings and they are about to enter the Promised Land. We read at the very beginning of today's text these words:

The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

The word Gilgal, which was a geographical location where the people consecrated themselves before entering into the Promised Land, means to "roll away".

Rolled away..... Is this creating any associations in your mind? What other place was like Gilgal? Yes indeed, the Garden of Resurrection

Isn't it apt that God talks about rolling away the disgrace of Egypt? The culmination of such disgrace was the complete dereliction our Lord experienced on the Cross. Here is the epitome of disgrace.

Disgrace. Think about this word. It means "void of grace – without grace – notta! Jesus, the one who is full of grace was willing to experience the full effects of disgrace so that we who have been disgraced by the power of sin can have the weight of sin rolled away from our lives and say with St. Paul:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

He took on our disgrace says Paul by bearing our sin so that in turn we might have his grace imparted to us. This theological language of Paul is made concrete for us in today's Gospel reading in two ways. There is the disgrace of the younger son, who upon his return home has the disgrace rolled away from him. Then there is the disgrace of the older son who has never left home. But rather than appropriating the grace that so motivated his father's life and making it his own, this son has a judgmental attitude that is such a weight that it ends up crushing him.

Jesus captures this younger son's disgrace in a most exaggerated way. The son finds himself far from home and is so hungry he is ready to eat pig's slop. Nothing could be more disgraceful for a Jewish boy than to be feeding pigs, unless of course their menu made you wanting to pig out from the smelly trough because there was nothing better for you in the fridge. For a Jew, this is disgrace writ large.

This parable is often named in relation to the disgrace experienced by this boy. We know him as the prodigal son.

The word "prodigal" means "to waste". As the story so clearly shows, this son did waste the inheritance that was his. Jesus puts it vividly when he summarizes his actions this way:

"He squandered his property on lose living."

He thought he would find meaning and value in his life by being free of dad. He demands such freedom when he states:

Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.'

Notice his emphatic attitude and demanding tone. Pope Francis points out in *The Joy of the Gospel* there are so many today living with the attitude of the younger son. Lives pervaded by consumerism and an anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart feverishly pursuing frivolous pleasures, where conscience has been blunted.

That about summarizes this kid's predicament.

But notice what happens next. The boy's conscience is awakened for Jesus tells us he "comes to his senses". But such an awakening also leads to an interior desolation. He feels disgraced, and thankfully turns for home. Upon arrival, he says the words he must have been repeating for days. For remember he was returning for a distant country. These words had become a mantra to him embedded on his soul.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you and am no longer worthy to be called your son".

Pope Francis again articulates something of this kind of remorse when he invites his readers to pray:

Jesus, Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace."

Some of you listening to me this evening might be thinking

"I know what the Holy Father is talking about."

Maybe you are here at Mass for the first time in ages. Maybe you know something of this disgrace. But even more I hope you know what it is like to come back home and have the disgraced rolled away.

For the Father isn't letting the son carry on, he is giving directions to the servants. It is party time. This son was lost and has come home.

Listen again to Pope Francis reflecting on such a home coming.

How good it feels to come back to him whenever we are lost! Let me say this once more: God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy.

The Father rolls away the disgrace by showering grace on his boy! On that day this home became another Gilgal as the party atmosphere got that stone rolling.

But sadly it rolled in the direction of the older brother and took him out.

For here is one who thinks he has it all together. He is so absorbed with an attitude of pride and self-righteous disdain for his brother. Here is the irony. He thinks his younger brother is a disgrace to the family. But the harbouring of an attitude like this results in his heart being embittered and crushed.

But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!

What is so sad about this older son is the one who ends up feeling disgraced is not the one who is the object of his vitriol but himself. Again turning to Pope Francis in the Joy of the Gospel he cautions us all:

There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.

Sadly this older son could not receive his father's grace as expressed in these generous words:

Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

What about you? In what ways do you struggle with what seems like a righteous self-indignation? For those of us wanting to live as disciples it can be easy for us to fall into the heart and mindset of the older brother. Angered by what is happening morally in our culture our lives can become brittle and joyless. When this happens, like the older son we can become hardened and refuse the celebration of grace always at play when prodigals return and the stone of disgrace is rolled away.

On this Laetare the church sings this party song.

“Rejoice, O Jerusalem: and come together all you that love her: rejoice with joy, you that have been in sorrow: that you may exult, and be filled... I rejoiced at the things that were said to me: we shall go into the house of the Lord.”

At the midpoint of Lent we look forward to the Garden of Resurrection, the greatest Gilgal of them all where the stone of disgrace is rolled away and the Lord of Grace breaks forth. As the Gospel declares and Father Jerome pointed out in his Pastor’s perspective this week:

Truly, the Joy that yearns to live and bubble forth from our hearts is one that seeks to convey before others how outside of our Heavenly Father’s love for us - as exemplified through the life, death and resurrection of His Beloved Son – there exists nothing other than a lonely emptiness that nothing can fill. We who have freely chosen to be in Our Father’s House of worship this day are invited to rest our weary souls in the comforting embrace of our Loving Father.

Such was the choice of the prodigal. Such was the choice of St Paul. He knew that the stone of disgrace had been rolled away when he announced:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!