**4th Sunday of Lent, Cycle C**

March 9/10, 2013

Joshua 5: 9A, 10-12; 2 Cor 5: 17-21; Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

*“Father, I have sinned against God and against you.”*

The prodigal son returned to his Forgiving Father. It was in his very nature to return to his father just as it is in our nature to return to God. We were made to love God forever. God is love and each of us is made in His image and thus we are made to love Him deeply, intensely, personally and completely.

We are living lives that are to lead us to the Father.

Just as the Forgiving Father loved his poverty stricken son who had sinned, so too we are to love those in need. We will meet them on the way back to God. We will meet them when we don’t expect them. We are to love them as God would love them.

Jesus reminds us in the parable of the prodigal son that we are to imitate the Forgiving Father AND we are to follow the footsteps of the prodigal son back home.

In the Forgiving Father he shows us that we do not truly love if we do not forgive those difficult to love people who, just like the prodigal son, fall into sinful ways of living. Yes, we do not truly love God if we fail to forgive others.

In the Prodigal Son, Jesus shows us that we are to come to know ourselves in our personal sins, to trust in His love and forgiveness, and to return to Him through the sacraments, asking him to pardon our sins.

Yes, our lives are a journey, a return to the Father. Our very hearts and souls were made for Him. We were made to touch Him, to hear Him, to see Him, to be reconciled with the Father who loves us, who searches for us and waits for us to return to Him.

The Gospel of the Prodigal Son is indeed a very challenging Gospel for all of us. It leaves us with a certain inner tension.

On one hand, we are drawn toward the love of the Forgiving Father, the intense love we seek that can only be found with God our Father who waits for us, searches for us and welcomes us home.

On the other hand, we are held back by the weight of our sins, held back by our fear that we will be rejected and unloved. We are held back because of our shame, just like the Prodigal Son was ashamed and was hesitant to return home.

Yes, our lives are caught between the desire to return and be forgiven, and the shame that holds us back.

We feel that tension don’t we, the tension between wanting to be embraced by the Father who loves us, and our fear of being seen for who we are and what we have done.

Is this not what keeps us away from the Sacrament of Penance, keeps us away for months or years sometime? We want the Father’s forgiveness but we fear being known in our sins.

Jesus teaches us today that we will not return to the Father if we don’t admit who we are and what we have done in our lives.

He wants to forgive us and relieve us of our shame and guilt. All we have to do is return. When we do, what happens? In the parable today we heard, “Then the celebration began.”

Yes, a celebration begins when we receive the Father’s forgiveness. His forgiveness is complete and total. He refuses to stay fixated on our sins. Rather, he destroys the sin and embraces the sinner, just like the Forgiving Father in the parable. God rejoices when we return and he gives us only the best: the finest rings, the best clothing, and the choicest food. God rejoices. Did you ever think that that is one thing our Sunday Mass is all about? It is a great celebration, a feast that God has prepared for those who have admitted their sins and have been absolved in the Sacrament of Penance. The Mass is in one sense a spiritual feast celebrating the reconciliation of men and women to God. We celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, the great act of redemption and reconciliation of mankind to God. We celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus which brought about our reconciliation with our Forgiving Father.

My friends, Jesus continually invites us to be reconciled to him. All of us is some way are prodigal sons or daughters. Do not fear! God does not remain fixated on our sins, but offers us freely his forgiveness. Then he wants us to come and eat with him. This is the great plea of the Church: “Be reconciled to God, then come and share our joy around the altar of sacrifice and eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ.”

The Church, in Jesus’ name, pleads with us especially during Lent to be reconciled. Fear not to return home, regardless of what you may have done, regardless of how ashamed you may be.

The Father is a forgiving Father.