

## Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year C

In offering us Psalm 34 for the Responsorial Psalm this Sunday, the Church is suggesting it as a reflection on today's Scripture readings. It begins with an invitation to praise God and goes on to say:

I sought the Lord, and he answered me,  
From all my terrors he set me free.  
Look towards him and be radiant;  
There is no need to hide your face in shame.  
This poor man called; the Lord heard him  
And rescued him from all his distress.

We think of Moses, caught up in contemplation for forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai. On his descent, the people were amazed. His face was radiant with divine light. We think of Jesus at the Transfiguration, and finally in his risen life as depicted by John in the Book of Revelation: 'His eyes like a flame of fire ... his face like the sun shining with full force'(Apocalypse 1:14,16). We think of Paul's exhortation that with unveiled face we look upon God's glory as it radiates from the face of Jesus. Looking upon him we reflect his glory like a mirror as we ourselves are transformed into his image (see 2Corinthians 3:18 and 4:6).

In today's Second Reading Paul assures us that, united to Christ, we are already experiencing a new life in anticipation of the final and complete transformation that we will experience when we are raised to life after death. We are very aware of the sin that is in our lives, and that through sin we have turned our back on communion with God. To enjoy this new life in Christ we must be reconciled with God. This is possible because of Jesus' love. He knew what it means to share our human weakness, our temptations, our disappointments, our suffering and our dying. He embraced us in our sin. He took our part. He stood with us. He ate and drank with us. Yet he remained sinless. He never stopped loving. And this is the source of our hope. Let us welcome this love and be reconciled with God. To do this we have to make a choice. Nowhere is this need to choose demonstrated as starkly as in today's Gospel of the two sons.

The younger son treats his father terribly, demands his inheritance, alienates it and then wastes everything. In his destitution he reflects on the mess he has created and decides to go back to the family farm – not to be a son, but as a hired worker. He just wants some money to put food into his stomach. He is not thinking in terms of reconciliation. He is just as self-centred, only now he is desperate. As the story unfolds, however, he is reconciled and enjoys a celebration that he knows he does not deserve. What makes the difference is the extraordinary love of his father, which finally gets to him. In his confusion he welcomes his father's embrace and for the first time humbly accepts the love that the father has wanted to lavish upon him.

The elder son seems to be very dutiful. However he does the right thing like a slave, not like a son. He owns what is left of the farm. As the father says: 'All I have is yours'. But when the father hurries out to him to invite him to the celebrations, he is self-righteous and angry. The father tries to persuade him to join in the festivities, but when the parable ends we are left in suspense. Does he finally go in, or does he stubbornly refuse? This is the choice facing us all. The unconditional love of God is offered to everyone. Being an offering of love it cannot be forced. God awaits our response. 'Be reconciled to God!'

As Jesus first presented this story, the sons represent alternative choices open to Jesus' contemporaries. The younger son represents Israel in exile because of sin. Jesus is calling them back to fidelity to their vocation to celebrate God's love and to take this love to the Gentile world. The elder son wants to stay with the way things are. Using the excuse of being faithful to tradition, he is resisting the building of a new temple and a new people open to the whole world.

The Spirit of the risen Jesus called us through the Second Vatican Council to embrace the world in love: 'The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and the anguish of the followers of Christ.'

Are we choosing the attitude of the elder son, content to do what we have always done, seeking security in habit, but failing to celebrate life or to reach out to others in love. Or, like the younger son, with our sins weighing heavily upon us, are we open to Jesus' message of reconciliation and love? Are we willing to be reconciled with God and to take this message of reconciliation out to the world? This is the mission entrusted to us by Jesus.

God's loving is for everyone. Everyone has the right and the need to look upon the glory of God radiating on the face of Jesus. We, his disciples, have a mission to take this love to everyone so that, like the younger son they may know God's love and welcome the reconciliation being offered them. Would it not be wonderful if everyone in our families, and all our acquaintances could repeat with the psalmist:

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From all my terrors he set me free.  
Look towards him and be radiant;  
There is no need to hide your face in shame.  
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