PRAYER

Psalm 34:2–7

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together. I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble.

READING THE WORD

First Reading
Joshua 5:9, 10–12

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. While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Second Reading
2 Corinthians 5:17–21

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Gospel

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He
replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ "

HEARING THE WORD

“The God who Reaches out”

Mid-way through the Lenten season, the liturgy offers a striking and reassuring portrayal of God reaching out to his people, which happens consistently and unconditionally, even amidst challenging and troubling circumstances.

The first reading looks back at Israel’s entry into the promised land. The very first act of Joshua after the crossing of the river Jordan was the circumcision of the new generation of the Israelite men. This was necessary because the generation who came out from Egypt proved itself disobedient and perished in the course of a 40-years-long desert journey (Josh 5:3-6). Our reading begins with God stating to Joshua, “today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt”. Many understand this statement as a reference to the disgrace of Israel’s Egyptian slavery. However, a more accurate translation from Hebrew reads that God rolled away the “reproach of Egypt”. This means that God removed the reason for the Egyptians to reproach that is to mock and disdain the Israelites. Knowing that the Israelites wandered home-less in the desert for 40 years, the Egyptians would ridicule them for trusting God who took them out the land of abundance - Egypt - and then abandoned them in the wilderness to die. Such mockery is hinted at in several biblical texts (Exod 32:12; Num 14:13-16; Deut 9:28). Now, God removed any reason for doubt and mockery by fulfilling his promise of the land, which will be settled by a new generation of the Israelites. This new generation assumes and legitimizes its identity as God’s people by undergoing circumcision immediately after entering the land.

The original Exodus generation failed the test of faithfulness and broke the covenant with God. Still, God reached out to their successors, fulfilling his promises, and maintaining his fidelity. This new generation of Israelites will have to make a new beginning. This is highlighted by the disappearance of manna, their desert food, and the command to cultivate the land and live off its fruits.

In the second reading Paul describes his apostleship as “the ministry of reconciliation”. Sin in its various forms separates humanity from God and requires reconciliation. While they were Gentiles, the Corinthians had lived sinful lives in ignorance of God and his commands. The Israelites followed the law, but sins still frequently occurred and sacrifices for reconciliation had to be repeatedly offered in the Temple. Then, God reached out to sinful humanity in an entirely new way - through his Son. Jesus offered a one-time self-sacrifice on the cross which reconciled humanity to God in a definitive way. To describe this, Paul makes a puzzling and a difficult statement that Jesus was made “sin” for our sake. Paul means here that Christ, even though himself sinless, suffered the fate of a sinner and experienced death, which is a direct consequence of human sin. Christ underwent death for the believers’ sake, in order that sin and its fruit - death - might be overcome. This victory happened when God raised Jesus from the dead. Therefore, those who are “in Christ” are no longer under the power of sin - they are reconciled to God through Christ, they are a “new creation”. Neither are they under the power of death because, like Christ, they will experience the resurrection.

Paul sees himself as the messenger of this wonderful mystery, and appeals to the Corinthians to respond to God. God reached out to them by sending his Son into the world. They, in turn, must respond to God through faith in Christ. It is this faith in Christ that reconciles them to God and
leads to eternal life.

Despite its popular title – “the parable of the prodigal son” – the story in today’s Gospel is a story about a father reaching out to his two lost sons. This story must be read and interpreted in the context of Jesus’s interaction with two groups of people. First, Jesus associated with tax collectors and sinners who were the outcasts of Jewish society because they committed acts that violated God’s laws and harmed others. Second, there were the Pharisees and the scribes who strictly followed God’s laws. They were genuinely surprised at Jesus’ association with the outcasts, which would make him ritually impure. These two groups are represented by the two sons in Jesus’ story.

The prodigal son represents the tax collectors and sinners. He was truly a sinner. The family property can only be divided after the father’s death. By demanding his share of the property, the younger son acts as if his father was dead. He then separates himself from the family and squanders everything living a life of debauchery. He ends up becoming a servant of a Gentile man and eating pig’s food. From the Jewish point of view, he is an utterly disgraced man excluded from the family and the community. But like the sinners who approached Jesus, he returns to the father with an honest acknowledgment of his sins.

The older son represents the Pharisees and the scribes. His merits, and his utter devotion to his father and to the family were unquestionable. But this led him into a self-righteous conviction that he alone deserved his father’s favor. Consequently, the older son refused to enter the household where the party for the younger brother was held. This, ironically, made him the next “lost son” who separated himself from his celebrating and reunited family because of his self-righteous convictions.

The father is the true hero of the story, for he reaches out to both of his lost sons. To the sinner son he offered an unexpected and shocking forgiveness, restoring him to the full status of a family member. To the older son, in an attempt to overcome his anger and bring him back into the household, the father offered an assurance that he was his rightful heir who “is always with him”. Thus, the story focuses on the father who reaches out to his misguided sons attempting to restore them both to the family. The sinner son returned to the family by asking for forgiveness and then accepting it. Interestingly, the story does not report whether the self-righteous older son accepted his father’s words and rejoined the family. Telling this story, Jesus was making a point that God reaches out to sinful humankind through his son who brought about divine-human reconciliation and thus set up a “new creation”. The gospel story shows a God who reaches out to those who separate themselves from him, either by sin or by self-righteousness. These examples provide a powerful assurance that the hand of God is always extended to his lost or separated children. Those who in return reach out to God can be confident of the truthfulness of the Psalmist’s words, “I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.”

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

A mighty oak tree stands in the open field with branches stretched out to the sky. Birds of different colours make their way to it. One by one, as they erect their nests to perch, they chirp, and the sound of the songs of their beaks evokes a sweet orchestra. Momentarily, some fly away in pursuit of pleasure elsewhere. However, when the dusk of night invades the light of day, they quickly fly back to their home in search of shelter and security. Deep down in their hearts, they know that the tree with outstretched branches is “home sweet home”.

The above imagery is descriptive of the relation-
ship that God has with us. He is forever for us and not against us. His loving presence is available to all who seek to live. Even when we run away from him in pursuit of forbidden pleasures, his compassionate arms remain outstretched, awaiting our return. We will never find a true home elsewhere, no matter how some alternatives might appear appealing for a time.

Drenched in sin, there are some who have given up any hope of recovery. They feel their sins are unpardonable and do not even dare to call God their Father. They are unable to bring themselves to the fact that the love of God is like the sun at midnight. It shines even in the darkest hour of our lives. His faithfulness is everlasting and his arms are forever outstretched to welcome us home.

Law enforcing agencies go after criminals to prosecute them but the outstretched arms of God go after sinners to embrace them. Even outcasts are not cast out of the sight of God. This is graphically expressed in the Gospel text – “While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). The attitude of the Father in the Gospel text epitomizes God’s attitude towards each one of us. He loves us as we are and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, as Paul beautifully stated (cf. Rom 8:39).

Generally, parents see something of themselves in their children. In their children, they see the flesh of their flesh and bones of their bones. Even those who are adopted parents often develop an affinity for those under their care and this creates a strong bond. It is said that “a loving mother bathing her baby does not throw away the latter with the dirty water”. A loving mother would not sit unconcerned when her baby falls to the ground.

During this season of Lent, God calls each one of us back home. He calls us to come back not because he wants to punish us for sins committed but to offer us the balm that would heal the festering wound caused by sin. His arms reach out to us not with a blow of the fist but a glow of a feast. He wipes away our tears and fills our hearts with the light of joy.

**PROVERB**

“The love of God is like the sun at midnight. It shines even in the darkest hour of our lives.”

**ACTION**

Self-examination:
When did I last have a deep feeling that God loves me? At what moment? Do I think of myself as being far or separated from God? For what reason?

Response to God:
I decide in my heart to confess and renounce all my sins, and to arise and go back to God’s arms that await to embrace and love me.

Response to your World:
Whenever overcome by doubt and self-pity, I will think about moments when I have experienced deep peace in my heart and remember the joy of being in the presence of God. Having experienced the love of God for us in many ways, we decide on some ways in which our group can become agents of wholesome change in our world. How can we be bridges of hope to those on the margins of society who have been labelled “bad”?

**PRAYER**

Eternal Father, in the person of your Son Jesus Christ, you have revealed to us who you truly are – the God of compassion who reaches out to his children. May this renewed image of you deepen our faith and cause us to reach out to all those who stand in need of love. Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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