

## REFLECTION FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

This Sunday's readings invite us to return to the Father's House, leaving behind our 'old' life without God, far from our brothers and sisters and without a future. To emphasise this idea, in the first reading we have a passage from the Book of Joshua, which tells us about the arrival of the People of Israel in the Promised Land, living the experience of freedom, leaving behind the slavery of Egypt. A new life opened up before them, and savouring their freedom, the Israelites began to settle in the Land that God had promised their fathers and to eat the fruits of that land. And they celebrated Passover, recognising that it was God who had led them from slavery to freedom.

In the second reading, St Paul tells us:

*'...if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;'*

We are a new creation if we live with Christ. From him we have received a new life, given to us in baptism. Renewed in Christ, we are called to live; reconciled with God and to be agents of reconciliation. Those who live the new life in Christ cannot remain hidden, they must announce this new life to the world, bringing people his message of reconciliation, peace and liberation, the Good News of Love.

Let us announce to everyone that God loves us, and that if we live his love in ourselves, we will experience the flavour of an authentically free life, because only love sets us free and gives deep meaning to our existence. Let us listen to St Paul:

*'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ,'*

In the Gospel, we hear one of the most beautiful parables told by Jesus: the parable of the prodigal son, but it can also be called the parable of the Father's love. The Father is the central character in this parable, a father with two sons and from whom the youngest asks for his share of the inheritance, and the father gives him what he asks for.

The son then abandons his father, his tenderness, his protection, his home, and leaves on his own, wanting to be happy on his own, without his father. This is man's oldest temptation: to want to be happy without his Father, without God. And God lets man leave his home, leave his company, leave his house. But when this happens, man always ends up facing his poverty, his nakedness, his misery.

This is what happened to that son. He thought that by leaving his father's house, by being master of his own destiny he would be free and happy, but he ended up in misery, tending to pigs.

But God never abandons man, he never closes his house to his children. This son, faced with his misery, remembers his father's house and decides to return. He is afraid that his father won't receive him, but he is willing to humble himself and ask his father to accept him, even if only as one of his labourers. But it is the father who leaves home and goes out to meet his son. This is God's eternal search for man: 'Man, where are you'? God is always looking for us.

When the son kneels down in front of his father and asks for forgiveness, the father does not even hear him, he knows that his son has returned, and he has him put on a new tunic, a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet, he restores his dignity as a son, and he celebrates this.

Meanwhile, the eldest son is in the countryside, he's the well-behaved son who always does what his father wants and who gets upset when he sees his father celebrating his brother's return. How difficult it is for the 'good guys' to accept God's extreme love! That is why the Pharisees, who were 'the pure', the keepers of the Law, condemned Jesus: they could not accept his message of welcoming sinners, of opening up the Kingdom of Heaven to everyone, of proclaiming a God of forgiveness and mercy for all. But God continues to say to us:

*'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'*

We can't be with God and away from our brother. We can't love God without loving our brother. God will always ask us: 'Where is your brother?'

When we find ourselves lost, far from God, let us not be afraid to return to his Fatherly arms; for he will always be waiting for us. And if we meet 'prodigal sons', let us invite them to return to the father and let us celebrate with them, savouring God's forgiveness and mercy in our lives and becoming agents of reconciliation, ambassadors of Christ, messengers of his Good News of peace, mercy and forgiveness.