

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 10, 2013

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We must never forget that Jesus was an excellent story teller. His teachings and parables were all before crowds of people who were used to hearing stories. There was then, and is today, a very rich tradition of stories in Jewish culture. There are folk tales, of course, and really good jokes. Torah, the Law, was meant to be recited as were the books of the prophets and the psalms, not read but spoken. They may have heard a story before, but that didn't matter; it was all in the delivery, and, apparently, Jesus was really good.

Jesus loves to draw on old themes in his stories. He knows that his listeners will make the connections with tradition. So we have the story of the Prodigal Son coupled with the reading from Joshua. Basically, it's the same story.

Joshua tells of the Jews, who had lived in Egypt for generations, entering Canaan, the Promised Land of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The "shame of Egypt is erased"; the provision of miraculous manna ceases, and they finally enjoy the abundance of the land.

At this point we should recall that the “shame of Egypt” was the fact that the Jews had gone to Egypt in the first place, generations before, to escape drought and famine. They had gone voluntarily. The shame is that in going, they had shown a lack of faith in the future which would actually be a lack of faith in the ability of Jahweh (JHWH) to get them through the crisis, to feed them and protect them.

To complete the shame, they had stayed in Egypt far longer than necessary. Apparently, they overstayed their welcome. Finally, their situation had been enslavement by the Egyptians.

When they are freed and finally return to Canaan, they must wonder what sort of reception they will have. Will their God punish them for their ancestors’ lack of faith?

They are welcomed by JHWH, completely forgiven and fed as though they had never left; the shame is erased.

It is interesting that recent Israeli research says that the story involves only the people of the tribe associated with the patriarch Joseph, not all the Jewish people. Some, perhaps many, Jews remained in Canaan all the while, maintaining their culture and worshiping JHWH while the Joseph tribe was in Egypt.

So we come to Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son. There are three points of view here. One is the father. He has waited and watched for the day when the son will return; he has never lost hope. When the son does appear he is overjoyed, welcomes him back with gifts and a feast.

One is the son. He makes his way home knowing that he has strayed far from his father’s care. He is ashamed and fearful of his father’s wrath. He apologizes and vows to be a good, faithful son.

One is the other brother, the one who has stayed with the father, serving him. He has been obedient to the father. Now, he sees the

errant other son arriving and being treated as though nothing had happened. He is angry; he is hurt.

You can see Jesus watching the faces of his listeners to see if they grasp the real meaning of the story. It's a mixed crowd. Some are descendants of Joseph; they find reassurance in the reconciliation with the father, with JHWH. The others, the majority, are not of Joseph's tribe. They find reassurance that God knows and values their faith and dedication. The word is reconciliation; the one who has strayed and the one who has stayed are reconciled to the father and to his family.

That is a powerful message of Lent. Reconciliation is available and accessible to all in the eyes of a compassionate and loving God. God's love has no limit: it's never exhausted and never diluted. When we wander off thinking we can manage our lives without God, he waits patiently. We need only take the first step toward home, sincere repentance, a desire to turn our lives around. He forgives us and feeds us.

In His Holy Name.