

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Year C
(Mar. 18, 2007)

Come to the Party

As frequently happens in our rectory, one morning early this past week Fr. Shea, our pastor, and I were together at the breakfast table. Fr. Shea looked at me over his bowl of Cheerios and asked, “Have any thoughts about your homily for this Sunday?” My answer to him was, “Jim it’s the story of the Prodigal Son. You can’t go wrong.” Now I tell you about this so you might understand that when Fr. Shea says something in his homily that you like, you know where he got it from. Of course from the opposite point of view if he says something you don’t like, he obviously didn’t get it from me!

At any rate the story I just read to you is one of the best known and most moving of all the parables of Jesus. Some people say it is the Gospel in miniature since it represents the heart of Jesus’ teaching and ministry: forgiveness, reconciliation.

There is a story told about the Russian author, Dostoevsky. You’ve heard of him. He wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, and other famous Russian novels. When he lay dying, he called his family to his bedside and asked his wife to read Luke’s story of the Prodigal Son. He listened with closed eyes, absorbed in this message of mercy and forgiveness. Then in a weak and halting voice, just before he died, he whispered, “My children, never forget what you have just heard. Have absolute faith in God. Never despair of his pardon. I love you dearly, but my love is nothing compared to the love of God. Even if you should be so unhappy as to commit a crime in the course of your life, never despair of God. You are God’s children; humble yourselves before God as before your Father, implore his pardon, and he will rejoice over your repentance as the father rejoiced over that of the prodigal son.”

Well I have a couple of my own ideas about this story. First of all what was the sin of the son? It was wrong of course to take his father’s money and squander it in loose living as St. Luke tells us. But even more important than that was the fact that he broke up the family. Families were very close-knit in Jesus’ time and the younger son destroyed that unity.

That's what sin does. It divides. The younger son said, "Bye-bye, Dad. I'm going off to see the world and have a good time. So long, big brother. You stay home and take care of the farm." So, off he went, lost all his money, and of course, lost his friends as well, and found himself starving and reduced to feeding the pigs, one of the worst things that could happen to a Jew.

We know the rest of the story. The son comes to his senses and returns home after planning to ask his father to treat him as one of his hired hands. The father sees his son coming home, runs out to meet him, throws his arms around him and kisses him. He is so happy to see him. The fact that he was watching for him means that he must have expected him to return and waited anxiously for the moment when this wayward son would appear. So he throws a party to welcome him back and invites in all the neighbors for a celebration. "My son who was dead has come back to life," he says. "He was lost and has been found."

Ah, but then there is the elder brother. He hears the music and dancing and becomes angry. He refuses to come in to the party or to be reconciled with his brother. The father is very eager to have the family made whole again so he goes out to persuade the elder son to come in and join the celebration. But he will not. He says "I've always done the right thing and this son of yours who wasted your money living riotously comes home and you fill the fatted calf for him." Well, maybe we can all feel some sympathy for this attitude. It does seem unfair, doesn't it? But Jesus, I think, has something else in mind. And here I think we can see the real reason for the story. Remember those Scribes and Pharisees we heard about in the beginning of the Gospel passage, the ones who were complaining that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners? They talk just like the elder brother, "We've always done the right thing." And they look down on others they think are not as good as they are. It seems to me that Jesus is inviting these people to join the party also, to be reconciled, to bring wholeness and unity to the people of God and not to stand at a distance judging and thinking that certain people were not worthy of their company. That's what Jesus came to do: to restore the unity that had been destroyed by sin.

The story has a kind of unfinished quality about it, doesn't it? We

don't know if the elder brother changed his mind was reconciled with his brother and went in to join the party. I'm a bit of a romantic so I'd like to think that he did. I've said this before and some of my more cynical friends have replied, "Nah, he remained stubborn and like those grumblers who complained about Jesus eating with sinners, would not go in to the celebration." From another point of view I think the story will not end until what Jesus came to do has been accomplished, until all people can sit down together and enjoy each other's company, all those who today are at odds or warring with one another. The world today needs a great deal of reconciling. We probably think immediately of Israelis and Palestinians, or the various warring factions in Iraq and Afghanistan, or maybe even of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and maybe we wonder what we can do to help these situations. Well I believe that reconciliation like charity begins at home. We begin by making sure that we have forgiven anyone who has offended us and we ask for and accept forgiveness of those whom we may have offended and that, I think is the more difficult thing to do. But I also believe there is a ripple effect. Our forgiveness of others can influence what goes on in the world around us. Who knows, an act of kindness here in Georgetown might be felt on the other side of the world. And that, dear friends is how we become "ambassadors of Christ" as Paul says in that second reading. That is how we respond to the invitation of Jesus to come to the party.