

OUR GOD IS A FORGIVING GOD

When God sent the Angel Gabriel to announce to Mary our Blessed Mother that she would be the Mother of the Messiah whom she would name Jesus, God also told Joseph her husband through the same angel the meaning of the name Jesus. The angel said to Joseph, "You are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (Luke 1:31, Matt 1:21). The name *Yeshua*, Joshua means God saves.

Mary believed that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled. When the time came, she gave birth to the Messiah who would save all humanity from their sins. The Messiah grew up and one day entered the synagogue where a scroll from Isaiah was handed to him, he read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19). He thereby affirmed that his mission of bringing salvation is through forgiveness of sins. Hence His mission accords with the meaning of his name, Jesus. Therefore, we can say that our God is the God who saves and forgives.

This brings us to the key verse for our sermon today, "I will arise and go to my Father" (Luke 15:18). This verse came from the context of the parable of the prodigal son. This son sinned greatly against his father and His family. He took his share of inheritance while his father was alive, meaning that he wished his father dead. As if that was not enough sin, he squandered his money in a loose and immoral life. Then he hit rock bottom. He lost everything and became homeless and a destitute. At that critical point in his life, he turned a new leaf. He repented and decided to go back to his Father and ask for forgiveness. The Word of God put it succinctly, "I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers" (Luke 15:18-19). The beauty of it all was that he actually did it. He rose and went to his father. He did not just say it or end up only in wishful thinking. The rest of the story were moving acts of the unconditional forgiveness which the repented prodigal son received from his loving Father.

That Father of the prodigal son is God. The way the father of the prodigal son forgave him is the way God forgives us when we repent. The angels in heaven rejoice and celebrate our return. This is where the two other parables mentioned in the gospel today tie in. The lost sheep and the lost coin refer to a sinner. God does not keep quiet. He does not want the sinner to die in his sins. He wants the sinner to repent and to come home. The pharisees and scribes were right when they complained that our God welcomes sinners and eats with them.

Dear brothers and sisters, this was not just a new thing about God. It is how God has always been from the beginning. The first reading today illustrated this. The people whom he carried like on eagles wings and brought out of the land of their captivity turned their backs on him. They became impatient and worshipped a golden calf. The Lord could have exterminated them in justice since they did not keep their part of the covenant but he did not. He forgave them. He heard the repentant pleading of Moses

on behalf of the people who sinned. Moses was a figure of Christ who interceded for us and reconciled us to the Father. The letter to Hebrews tells us of the intercessory work of the Lord, "He is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them. On the night of the last Supper, he said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mtt 26:28). At the end, while hanging on the cross, he summed it up by saying, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

May we remind ourselves of God's infinite mercy when we feel tempted to despair because of our sins and failings. "This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost" (1 Tim1:15).

How do we avail ourselves of the mercy of God? It is to ask him for it and to repent of our sins. The sacrament of reconciliation known as confession is the sacrament where we encounter God's mercy. There are two attitudes in the face of sin, unhealthy and healthy. The former is to deny it and pretend that we did not do anything wrong and then try to deaden or quieten the conscience with candies, chocolate, beer, liquor or cigarette. The healthy attitude is to admit and acknowledge our sins and mistakes and ask God's forgiveness. St Paul gave us an example in the second reading, he confessed his sins in such an honest and candid manner. "I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and an arrogant man" (1 Tim 1:13). The difference between him and Judas is that Judas did not repent and did not confess his sins.

Dear brothers and sisters, may we never forget that our God is a forgiving God. May we therefore resolve to do examination of conscience by asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds that we see both the ugliness of our sins and God's infinite mercy each and every day. May we make resolution to go to confession when need to and may we resolve never to deny our sins or explain it away.