



Prodigal Sons and Daughters: Easing the Transition from Incarceration to Home

Considerations from Sacred Scripture for Homilists Lent 2010

Every day brothers and sisters re-enter our society from institutional corrections [jail or prison] and in community based corrections [parole and probation]. They are making a challenging transition while simultaneously trying to abandon their past criminal ways. They are today's prodigal sons and daughters. The parable of the lost son in Luke 15: 11-32 [the gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Lent] calls on us to reflect upon their future and ours. Like the father in the parable, we as believers have lost sons and daughters. In our case they have been convicted of crimes, and will return to our community having, in the words of the law, 'paid their debt to the society'. The challenge is how we will receive them? Will it be with open arms as the father did? He gives his young son the signs of a free people - the ceremonial robe, the signet ring, and shoes. Or will it be with the hardened heart of the older son who refuses to even enter his father's house, much less join in welcoming his younger brother home. The parable is left open ended for each generation of believers to live out. Will we, in the words of St Paul, ". . . **encourage one another and build one another up as we do**"? [1 Thessalonians 5:11] Will we ". . . **pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another**"? [Romans 14:19] We are called to love, to forgive, and to serve. The question is whether we will live out our calling, or whether we too will be prodigals - ignoring love, withholding reconciliation, and refusing to serve.

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTIONS:

Ash Wednesday

"Brothers and sisters, we are ambassadors of Christ, as if God were appealing through us." [2 Corinthians 5:20] Each of us is called as an ambassador to witness His love, forgiveness, and service to the least among us. The prophet Joel reminds us at the end of our first reading: *"Then the Lord was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on His people."* [Joel 2:18] Among His people, the least among us, are those in jail and prison as well as for their families. Our for them concern can be expressed in prayer for their rehabilitation and support during their re-entry into society. Our respect for all life includes those who have broken the law. No-one should be a throwaway or considered ir-redeemable. We are called to build each other up..

First Sunday of Lent

" . . . the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon Him. For "everyone who calls on the name of God will be saved." [Romans 10:12-13] We are one with all humankind. Each of us is His prized creation - uniquely gifted. We have likewise also experienced breaking rules - His and probably some of our society. In our weaknesses and temptations we are one with our brothers and sisters in jail and prison. Jesus died for their sins as well as ours. He forgives all sinners, can we do any less? Let us pray for them and their families. Let us pray for the success of their rehabilitation, support them in their re-entry, and welcome them home.

Second Sunday of Lent

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? The Lord is my life's refuge; of whom should I be afraid?" [Psalm 27:1] Our mass media too often paints all those who have broken the law as predators. In so doing the fear-mongering begins. We should not forget that those to be released also fear. They feel the uncertainties in their ultimate release and acceptance by the community and family they left months, years or decades before. Food, clothing and shelter are immediate need. Acceptance, trust, and employment are close seconds in terms of need. Let us keep them and their families in our prayers and work to insure that viable and responsive re-entry programs exist.

Third Sunday of Lent

" . . . He pardons all your iniquities, He heals all your ills. He redeems your life from destruction, He crowns you with kindness and compassion." [Psalm 103:3-4] Our God unhesitatingly forgives. We need to do no more than to turn to Him and confess our failings. The question is whether we are equally committed to reach out in love and forgiveness to those who have broken the law and are completing their sentence. A popular hymn asserts *"they will know that we are Christians by our love"*. May our actions speak as clearly of that love. The psalm continues: ***"The LORD secures justice . . ."*** [Psalm 103:6]

RCIA Optional Year A: "Oh, that today you would hear His voice: Harden not your hearts . . ." [Psalm 95: 7-8] Hearts are hardened through anger and the desire for retaliation and retribution. All too often 'justice' has been reduced to a tool for getting even. When a person in jail or prison has 'paid their debt to society' are we ready to welcome her and him home with open arms? Are we ready to commit as many resources to assume successful re-entry as we were to investigation, conviction and incarceration? We should not deny these brothers and sisters hope. In St Paul's words from our second reading: ***" . . . hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."*** [Romans 5: 5]

Fourth Sunday of Lent

" . . . This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." [Luke 15:2] These were the complaints of the scribes and the Pharisees against Our Lord and Savior. His response was to share a powerful parable - that of the father and the two sons. The younger son demands his

share of the estate, leaves home and " . . . *squanders his inheritance on a life of dissipation.*" He realizes the error of his ways and returns, saying: "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.*" [Luke 15:18] The Father forgives and rejoices while the older brother responds in anger - refusing to even enter his Father's house. Which do we choose to emulate? Can we write-off brothers and sisters as unworthy of forgiveness, as ineligible for our assistance as they re-enter our community? Our assistance and support does not reward their previous behavior. But it does mirror our commitment to life and building one another up. These are values in our Father's house.

RCIA Optional Year A: "*Brothers and sisters, You were once darkness, but you now are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light . . .*" [Ephesians 5:8]

The pundits say that there is a little larceny in each of us. Certainly, each of us recognizes the times there have been periods of darkness in our lives. Let us pray today for those whose time of darkness put them in jail or prison, for their journey to the light through rehabilitation, and their successful re-entry. Let us also prayer for their families which have suffered humiliation, insecurity and isolation. May we welcome all home in this faith community.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

"*Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see I am doing something new!*" [Isaiah 43:18-19] The past is written, today and tomorrow are clean slates for us to write on. The past needs to be reconciled with in order to move on. If one fails to forgive, the future will be filled with anger and fear.

RCIA Optional Year A: "*If you, O Lord, mark iniquities, Lord, who can stand? But with you is forgiveness that you may be revered.*" [Psalm 130: 3-4]

We are all assured of the Lord's forgiveness if we will but acknowledge our sin and live out His two great commandments of love. As we pray the Our Father, we must always remember the great conditional clause - '*. . . forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us . . .*' May we never forget to forgive. Those heavy with anger and the desire for revenge are in a self-imposed prison. Let us pray today for those in jail and prison. Let us pray for the success of their rehabilitation and re-entry.

PRESENTATION RESOURCES:

The following deacons have experience with the corrections system and have volunteered to deliver presentations on re-entry. Each can be contacted through their entry in the Official Diocesan Directory.

Deacon Paul Clement
Deacon Laurence Feasel
Deacon Greg Kiley
Deacon Alberto Pacete
Deacon John Tomandl
Deacon Nicholas Valvo

PRAYER

Jesus, united with the
Father and the Holy Spirit,
Give us your compassion for
those in jail and prison.

Mend in mercy
the broken in mind
and memory.

Soften the hard of heart,
the captives of anger.

Free the innocent;
parole the trustworthy.
Awaken the repentance that
restores hope.

May prisoners' families
persevere in their love.

Jesus,
Heal the victims of crime.
They live with the scars.
Lift to eternal peace
those who die.

Grant victim's families the
forgiveness that heals.

Grant wisdom to lawmakers
and to those who judge.

Instill prudence
and patience
in those who guard.

Make those
in prison ministry
bearers of your light,
for all of us are
in need of your mercy.

AMEN

Source: Deacon Larry Feasel, Re-entry Subcommittee, Diocesan Public Policy Committee, Rochester, NY, 2009