

“Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.”

Joshua 5:9

To understand the link between today’s First Reading from the Book of Joshua and today’s Gospel passage about the Prodigal Son we have to focus on the time spent away from the Father. The Prodigal Son spent much time turning his back on his Father’s goodness and generosity. During that period, the Prodigal Son lived a life of extravagance and debauchery until, finally, his wealth ran out and he found himself destitute.

After the People of Israel left their state of slavery in Egypt they spent forty years wandering in the desert. However, most of the familiar Biblical stories about what happened during those forty years took place either during the first year after leaving Egypt or in the final year immediately before they crossed into the Promised Land. We know almost nothing about what happened in the intervening thirty-eight years. But if we pay close attention to the few details we *do* have then we can find out quite a lot. For example, the people spent a surprising amount of time grumbling about how bad things were in the desert, complaining that they had been brought out into the desert merely to die (Ex 16:3) and wishing instead that they were back in Egypt where at least they had plenty to eat such as fish, and cucumbers, and melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (Num 11:5).

The Prodigal Son turned his back on his father because he had everything he wanted and didn’t need his father anymore, whereas the People of Israel – who had been freed from slavery in Egypt – turned their back on God and grumbled incessantly precisely because they *didn’t* have everything they wanted. In both cases the characters concerned spent a long time away from – and turning their backs on – the One who was the source of their good fortune.

Of course, you and I wouldn't dream of doing anything so ungrateful as to turn our backs on God just because we had everything we needed and didn't need God anymore. Nor we would be so foolhardy as to turn from Him just because things weren't going our way and life was hard at the moment, as if we had a right to an easy life and perfect bliss.

You and I have more sense than to ignore God when things are going well, as the Prodigal Son did. When things are going well in *our* lives, we immediately turn to God and sing His praises in heartfelt thanks, don't we?

By the same token, you and I have more sense than to blame God just because things aren't going the way we want them to go; you and I have more sense than to get angry with God, or to turn away from Him altogether, just because life has dealt us a bad hand, haven't we?

Well, the truth is, we *all* sometimes forget that the goodness in our lives comes from God. Sometimes we are so excited about our good fortune, or so pleased with our own accomplishments, that we lose sight of the fact that it is God who has poured these gifts into our laps.

And the truth is, that we *all* sometimes blame God when things go wrong, and when things are not how we want them to be: when misfortune strikes or when all our efforts come to nothing. We blame God and get angry with Him – after all, He could have arranged things differently, couldn't He? – and we grumble and even sulk.

We forget God in our elation, and we blame Him in our despondency.

This is the 'reproach of Egypt' that was mentioned at the beginning of the First Reading, the reproach that we lay at the feet of Almighty God, namely our forgetting God in the good times and our blaming God in the bad.

Yet God never forgets us, even when we forget Him. And God never holds grudges, as we hold grudges. For the People of Israel, God was with them throughout their

forty-year long journey even though they ignored Him for thirty-eight of those years. He still brought them to the Promised Land, and when they remembered Him, and turned to Him again, and celebrated the Passover once more, He renewed His covenant with them and gave them ‘the fruit of the land of Canaan.’

Similarly, the father never once stopped looking to the horizon for his Prodigal Son, and as soon as he saw him returning, he ran to him ‘and embraced him and kissed him,’ and draped him in the best robe and slaughtered the fatted calf for a feast.

You and I wander from God many times in the course of our lifetimes; many times in the course of a single day perhaps. We forget to give thanks to Almighty God for His extravagant blessings and graces when times are good; and when things go badly wrong, we blame Him, or get angry with Him, or simply turn away from Him and stop talking to Him altogether. Yet, for all our faithlessness, God is Emmanuel, God is with us, walking with us into a far country where we squander His goodness, and walking alongside us through the desert of our misery and wretchedness. And *as* He accompanies us in our wanderings, He waits, patiently, for us to be converted and to turn to Him again.

Holy is God. Holy and strong. Holy immortal One. Have mercy on us.