

A friend of mine just lost his father last weekend – 87 years old. The father was a stern man, very strict with his children. Too strict. He never physically abused his children, but he regularly hurt them with words. A lot of times parents yell at their kids when they're angry about something else. Something goes wrong at work and they take it out on the kids later in the day. But in other cases, something went wrong in the parents' life when they were children, and they punish their kids for it years later. My friend thinks this was the case with his father. As a child his dad had one sister, but she died at a very young age. Her mother never got over this grief. She never again allowed the other children to celebrate Christmas or birthdays because she thought it would show disrespect for their deceased sister. How could they pretend there was joy when there was so much sorrow? My friend's father was 10 years old when these events happened, and he lived the rest of his life a stern and difficult man. Still, somehow, his children have grown in wisdom, love and forgiveness. And we all pray that the old man will experience in death a love he never knew in life.

Lent is all about death and resurrection, exile and freedom. Faithful Catholics do Lenten penance. We do it because our sins exile us from God, and because God's grace frees us from our faults. Also during Lent catechumens prepare for baptism; they die to whatever keeps them from Christ, and they rise to a new way of life.

In the Old Testament several stories prefigure this movement from death to life and from exile to freedom. At the Easter Vigil we'll hear the story of Israel's Exodus from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Today we hear about the Babylonian captivity. Several hundred years after Israel arrived in the Promised Land, an invading army captured Jerusalem and carried the people away from their homeland to Babylon, the very city known today as Baghdad. Eventually, they were set free, and that's the story of today's first reading. But while they were there, life was difficult, and that's what's going on in today's responsorial psalm. It goes, "By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Jerusalem." It was bad enough sitting in a strange land by a strange river, and missing home. But then the captors asked the prisoners to sing the songs of their homeland. It was too much for them to bear. The psalm goes, "How could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?" How could we pretend there is joy, when there is so much sorrow? They eventually got free, but not before they suffered and made others suffer with them.

Lent is our time of sorrow. We call to mind our sins, and we try to figure out why we do them. Why do we make life difficult for other people? What makes that so appealing? Why do we choose a path that brings sorrow to us, to others and to God? Sometimes the answer is an event that took place a long time ago. If we open our hearts to God's grace, our lives can be changed, and our future will be filled with joy.