

## **"Egypt or the Promised Land: Where are we?"**

Homily of March 23, 2003

by Gerry Murphy

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And God Said: "I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall have no other gods besides me."

Did you ever see the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*? Well, for those of you who have not seen it, I highly recommend it. It is a powerful and engrossing prison drama about how two men serving life sentences become friends and find a way to fight off despair. To my mind, the movie is a wonderful study of the human condition - a story of friendship, patience, hope and ultimate redemption.

One of the movie's most endearing but tragic characters is an old guy named Brooks. Now Brooks had spent almost fifty years in the prison, and when finally his parole comes up, he feigns insanity so that he'll be kept in prison - so much has he become institutionalized and conditioned to prison life. However, Brooks' feigned insanity ploy fails and he is released. But shortly after, in the crazy, fast-paced world that he re-enters, the lonely, fearful, melancholic and disoriented Brooks hangs himself. As the wording in the posters advertising this movie put it: Fear can hold you prisoner, hope can set you free. Tragically Brooks allowed his fears to ultimately consume him.

It seems to me that the ancient Israelites referred to in our first reading this morning went through the same kind of destabilizing experience as old Brooks. And they didn't fair much better than him. Here we have a group of people whom, through Moses, God had liberated from years of captivity and enslavement in Egypt. But eventually the long trek across wilderness and desert to the Promised Land became too much for them. They longed to return to Egypt where, in spite of their captivity, life was predictable, safe and familiar. Now the Israelites had begun to lose faith in God who was leading them home; and so they began creating and worshipping other gods.

Perhaps, in the light of these telling illustrations of the human condition, we might pause and ask ourselves the following questions:

Firstly: Where in my life am I imprisoned and held in some kind of bondage? Could it be the bondage of an addiction of one kind or another? - an addiction I am in denial over in spite of the egregious ways it has violated my spirit and ripped apart my family. Could it be the bondage of a heart soured and embittered by the absolute refusal to forgive? Or could it be the bondage of another's controlling manipulation of me; and I am too scared or too weak to break free? Where am I serving time in prison?

Secondly: Where in my life am I immobilized by fear? - stuck in Egypt unable and unwilling to move out into the unknown where life holds endless possibilities for me. Could it be the fear of failure and what others might think of me if my plans and ambitions don't work out? Could it be the fear of letting obsolete and old ways of thinking go? - ways of thinking that have served me well for decades. Or could it be the fear of dying? - that ultimate act of surrender to the God who gave me life. In what way has fear stunted my growth?

And thirdly: Where in my life have I created and begun to worship false gods in? Could it be the God of cosmetic perfection and the body beautiful? Could it be the God of material wealth? Or could it be the God of weapons, violence and war? - A God whom I believe will correct all that is wrong in the world and restore stability and order to humankind. At what other altars do I sometimes choose to worship?

Some years ago when I was a young Redemptorist seminarian in Ireland, I learned to sing a beautiful Christian folk hymn called The Galilee song. Now don't worry, I'm not going to break into song! But I would like to conclude by reading for you the words of one of the verses, as I believe they very aptly capture the essence of what my homily is trying to say:

As I gaze into the night, down the future of my years  
I'm not sure I want to walk, past horizons that I know  
But I feel my spirit call, like a stirring deep within  
Restless until I walk again, beyond the fears that close me in