

Lent IV 2019 (Year C)

Traditionally the fourth Sunday of the Lent is called “Laetare Sunday” (Rejoice Sunday) after the opening words of the Introit Sentence of the old Latin Mass – Laetare Jerusalem – ‘Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her’ that you may drink deeply with delight from her consoling breast. For thus says our God, ‘You shall be nursed and carried on her arm. As a mother comforts her children, so I will comfort you.’ In this we have a strong hint as to why this Sunday became known as Mothering Sunday. What we also have on this midpoint of our Lenten journey are readings which all seem strongly to anticipate Easter joy, and also the strong sense of God’s invitation to allow ourselves to have cause to rejoice in the knowledge that through repentance or *metanoia* – always seeking to orient ourselves Godward in all that we do, think or say - God calls us to dwell secure in the knowledge of the Divine Love which is never condemnatory but overflowing with compassion and forgiveness.

Charles Dickens called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, ‘The Greatest Short Story in the World,’ and there is no doubt that it is a vivid encapsulation of God’s Love. In fact, the compilers of the Lectionary have cut two short parables placed immediately before the Prodigal Son. This is a pity, because I think that they have something which further enriches our understanding of the message this parable teaches us.

Both the previous parables are aimed at the listener as a direct appeal: ‘Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? The second, ‘What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?’ In both, Jesus has the characters calling their friends and neighbours to rejoice, and he compares this rejoicing with that of heavenly rejoicing over one sinner who repents. But what shepherd in their right mind would leave ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to go to look for one? Even allowing for the value of a silver coin, our neighbours would find it very odd to hold a party to celebrate finding one! In fact, Jesus is using both to explain the reckless, unbounded love of God both those who repent – an offer open to the whole of humanity. Restoration in both parables represents connection to the whole community – the flock, the riches. In both cases a party - a festival meal - is implied, and this is in part an answer to the reference to grumbling Pharisees Jesus is responding to. They are so caught up in the hide-bound rules of Torah; of who, with, how and when they could eat, that they have lost the plot of their common connection and journey with other people.

It is no mistake that Jesus represents the Lost Son as reduced to such poverty that he ends up feeding pigs. This would have deeply shocked any of the hearers, because none of them, Jesus included, would have ever eaten pork. The dietary laws forbade it. In fact, the man is so hungry, he even considers eating the pods he is feeding to the pigs! This dissolute period of squandering his birth-right and fall leads to a change of heart. Note that the movement towards reconciliation is his – he must make up his own mind to return to his father. From that, we have the wonderful image of the father running towards his son in unbounded love. This all embracing. Love requires no formula of words. The son is forgiven.

Then the other son – the faithful one who has never left home, never disgraced the family, himself displays flaws within his character. We see that both have a good and bad side to their characters. The bad side of the Prodigal is revealed in his reckless regard for anyone other than himself until he is reduced to the gutter; his good side, that he is open to the grace his father will show, and realises the importance of the support, love and sense of belonging at the heart of the family he has strayed from, even if he feels that he is unworthy to belong.

The other son feels betrayed. He has sought to do his best - to be faithful to his father. Yet perhaps he has lost vision in his work. He has gone along blindly, with a growing sense of alienation whilst not recognising the providence of his situation. He despises his father's generosity of forgiveness and can't even begin to contemplate sitting down at the table with his brother. He can't see that this feast for his brother is incorporation within community, within humanity. To him his brother is beyond the pale, and he doesn't want to reconnect with him. Like the Pharisees Jesus is responding to, he has made himself a slave to his work, as they had become rigid and unrealistic carrying out of the laws of Torah. Yet ultimately, despite his bitterness, his father shows him the same expansive love he has to the other son. What a call to us in our own relationships!

There are no 'ifs' or 'buts' to God's Love. The same love showed by the Father to his child, is the same God shows to **us** when **we** seek to draw close. I spoke of the almost reckless nature revealed in these parables as Jesus hammers home the message about the selfless nature of God's love for us. Jesus too displays this same love, as we will see over these coming weeks as we journey with him through Passion, Death and Resurrection. Our journey is one constantly seeking to allow ourselves to be conformed to the person each one of us is called to be, secure in the knowledge of God's reckless and abiding love for us. So, yes - Rejoice Jerusalem.....and may **we** too rejoice at such love.



The Prodigal Son – Geily Korzhev (1925-2012)

Joshua 5:9-12

The Lord said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.' And so that place is called Gilgal [*to roll*] to this day.

While the Israelites were encamped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

2 Corinthians 5: 16-end

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;[b] even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view,[c] we know him no longer in that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,[d] not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-end

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable:

'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."