

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
27th March 2022 - 4th Sunday of Lent Laetare Sunday

Readings (Year C): 1st: Joshua 5:9-12. Psalm: 33. 2nd: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. 10-12. Gospel: Luke 15:1-3. 11-32.

‘If all the Scriptures were to be destroyed with the exception of one passage, my choice to be preserved would be the beautiful parable we have just heard, the parable of sinners and God’s total forgiveness.’ So wrote one of the commentators on today’s gospel.

It is the essence of salvation history. Because it is so familiar the parable can bounce off the surface of our minds, so it is important to contemplate it.

With our lips and our heads we can say that God is a God of mercy and compassion, but at a deeper level of consciousness we may think of him as God the Judge, whose primary interest is in our sins and their appropriate punishment.

If such is our image, then we shall measure closeness to God as being in direct proportion to sinlessness, and estrangement from God in proportion to offences committed.

Jesus presents a totally different picture of God, which scandalized the Pharisees, who felt justified in getting rid of Jesus. The parable questions our image of God: is it Jesus’ image or that of the Pharisees?

God welcomes the prodigal, you and me, not because of our virtue, merits or achievements, but simply because we are his, and he loves us. God is represented as waiting for the child, as though he had no other interest, recognizing him even when still a long way off, rushing out to meet him, apparently not even hearing his confession of guilt. In prayer, meet and feel this welcome to you.

The elder brother represents the Pharisee in us, the God-the-judge part of us, which resents God’s generosity to any who do not reach our standards of respectability and correctness. The Pharisee relishes his moral superiority. It is this sort of attitude which has turned so many away from the church. The Good Shepherd pursues and rejoices in them when they are found. Both sons confront us with the question: which am I: one or the other or a mixture of both?

Either way, **the Father goes out of his way for all of us**, which is why our three readings today speak in different ways of the immense generosity of God.

The book of Joshua (Heb: Jeshua) tells of the new life God gave to the people of Israel following the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, and entered the Promised Land. Here is described how they finally reached maturity as they ate the produce of the land and no longer relied, infant-like on the heavenly manna. There at last they had the opportunity to live with hearts open to God. We know, however, that the attempt failed. The nation continued to sin and could only be restored to right relationship, reconciled to God, by the Father giving his unconditional love in and through the death of Jesus.

In the 2nd reading St Paul uses the verb ‘to reconcile’ five times, as he explores the depths of the forgiveness Christ has won for us and the implications of the new life which that brings. We are, he says, a new creation, God does not do things in small measure, half-heartedly, ‘in him, Christ, we become the goodness of God.’

The gospel is all about the reconciling love of God the Father. It is talking about God’s attitude towards us in just the same way that Paul does: “God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men’s faults against them.”

What a gift! Taste and see that the Lord is good!