

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32: *Jesus' parable of the loving and forgiving father who welcomes back his wasteful and repentant son.*

All the tax collectors and sinners came near to listen to Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes were grumbling, 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 said, '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; 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. He went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to feed the pigs in the fields. He would gladly have filled himself with what the pigs were eating; 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. 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. 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; when he 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.'"

COCU22C. Lent 4C. Readings

The theme this week stands out very clearly – God removes disgrace; God forgives and restores; the prodigal is welcomed home and reconciled to his family; God reconciles us to God's Self, and to each other, and we are called to do the same. Forgiveness flows from God's infinite and unconditional grace, and is received through honest confession and repentance. Reconciliation with God, as much as it brings personal healing and restoration, is not only personal. It is also social, drawing us back into reconciliation with others, and into passing on to others the healing and grace we have received.

GLOBAL APPLICATION: Forgiveness and reconciliation are a global necessity, but are a very scarce resource. Denial, projection, deflecting blame, and covering up appear to be the strategies of our age – in governments, in corporations, and even in the Church. The inevitable consequence of this is that those who are victimised and damaged, are generally left to bear their pain alone, with no hope of restitution, and no acknowledgement, apology or offer of help from those who have inflicted their suffering on them. We have seen this during the economic meltdown; we have seen it in third world countries, where exploitation by wealthy nations have left these countries bare of resources, and in deep debt (Haiti is a good example of this); we have seen it in the Church, where victims of abuse have been silenced or accused to protect the institution. As long as this remains the practice in our world, we will remain broken, and we will continue to break ourselves and others. Now is the time to proclaim that forgiveness is possible, is necessary and is the way to healing for us all. How can we call our world to honest confession, true, practical repentance, and into the life-giving way of forgiveness received and shared?

We know when people live together there will be disagreements, differences of belief and culture, and hurt inflicted on one another, whether intentional or not. We also know that maintaining the cycle of pain through broken relationships, grudges, judgment and paybacks only brings greater suffering. Jesus has offered us both the principle and the role model – in his teaching and in his actions Jesus demonstrated the healing and restoration that comes when we forgive and reconcile. It is a shame that we find it so hard to live this teaching out. But, if we, as followers of Christ can't learn to admit our sin, repent of wrong action, and reconcile with those we have hurt – or have hurt us – what hope is there for the world?

(John van de Laar, Sacredise)

Psalm 32: *A celebration of the joy and healing that confession brings, and the restoration that God offers those who admit their sin. God's promise to instruct and guide those who trust in God.*

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

**Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

**Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah**

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

**Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.**

Joshua 5:9-12: *The Israelites celebrate the Passover, as God proclaims that the "disgrace of Egypt" is removed from them, and have their first meal in Canaan. The day after that the manna stops arriving.*

The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the Israelites were camped 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 5:16-21: *In Christ we are reconciled to God, and we are called to invite others into this reconciliation – both between people and God, and between people and people.*

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 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. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

'I wonder if you've ever sat around your kitchen table and someone hasn't been there. Someone who normally is. Maybe they've been away for the weekend and missed the family meal. Maybe they were away for good. Have you noticed what that gathering feels like, what goes on in your mind when you look at the seat they used to fill. It's hard to enjoy yourself completely when there is someone missing. We are ALL diminished when someone is missing. We are relational creatures, woven into this life together – not existing merely alongside each other. There is a part of me that isn't seen when you're not here to see it'.

(Malcolm Gordon, Empty Chairs and Empty Tables)
(Image: Forgiving Father, Frank Wesley)

