

LENT IV *Laetare* 31 March 2019

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White, Rector of St Andrew's Parish, Kent, Connecticut

Joshua 5.9-12; Psalm 32; II Corinthians 5.16-21; Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32

This year, most of our Gospel readings come from Luke's Gospel, and Luke's is the parable-rich Gospel. It contains more of Jesus' stories than do the Gospels of the other three evangelists, and this morning we hear one of the two (probably) most famous parables, that of the Prodigal Son, which is found only in Luke. The other famous one is that of the Good Samaritan, which is also unique to Luke; but today we hear the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

For the past couple of weeks we have been hearing Jesus tell those who are following him that they need to repent. Repentance—in Greek, *metanoia*—means 'to turn again', to turn towards God and begin to pay attention to what it is that God expects God's people to be about, to turn back to God and listen for God's voice. He has been encouraging repentance, and today he describes what the response to repentance is.

There are two shorter parables that precede the telling of the Prodigal Son, and the context for all of these parables is that the Pharisees are grumbling that Jesus teaches and eats with likes of tax collectors and other 'sinners'—reprobates whose company any 'good' rabbi would shun. The Pharisees are complaining, and the parables are Jesus' reply.

The first is about a shepherd who loses one sheep and leaves the other ninety-nine in the flock in order to find it. When he does, he picks it up, carries it back to the flock, and then calls in his friend and neighbors to celebrate because he has retrieved the one lost sheep. The second story is about a woman who has ten small, silver coins—ten *drachmae*—and misplaces one of them. She tears the house apart until she finds the missing coin and then summons her friends and neighbors to come over and rejoice with her.

And ... these are pretty much preposterous stories describing God's joy and the jubilation in the heaven over even a single sinner who repents. For ... what shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep alone to go in search of a lone lost one ...? And who overturns a house in order to find a solitary lost coin ...? And who then throw parties when these lost things have been found ...?

And then comes the story that we have just heard, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It perhaps engages us more than the other two because it is about human relationships—how we live with one another—and each of us may see a bit of ourselves in the younger brother, and a bit of ourselves in his older brother, and may hope to find a bit of their father within us.

The younger brother demands his inheritance and the father without question hands it over to him. He goes to a faraway country to live among Gentiles and spends all that he has in 'dissolute living'. Eventually he finds himself, a Jew, hiring himself out to care for a Gentile's pigs—unclean animals that a Jew ought to avoid. He 'comes to himself', realizes that he is not who he needs to be and ... he repents; he resolves to return to his father and declare his ... *metanoia*.

His father sees him coming a long way off and has ‘compassion’ on him; but that word that we hear translated as ‘compassion’ is really so much stronger, for the father ‘yearns in his bowels for him, grieves viscerally over him, and goes out to meet him at that great distance. And before the son can even finish his declaration of repentance, the father orders the servants to put a clean robe –‘the best one’—on him, to put a costly ring on his finger, and to put sandals on his bare feet. The father has already given him great riches that he has squandered, and now the father lavishes still more on him and calls together their friends and neighbors to celebrate. There is a party to welcome back the son who was dead and is alive again, was lost and is now found.

This is a parable about resurrection –a prefiguration of The Resurrection on Easter—because new life has emerged from old life, in repentance, changed life has emerged from what was before. And, the elder son is angry, deeply offended: he will not go into the party, and so the father once more goes out to a son. Look, he tells him: everything that I have to give is already yours, but this son of mine and brother of yours was lost and is now found, was dead and is now living anew, is living a new and changed life. We need to rejoice; come in and celebrate

The father is perhaps more accessible to us than the shepherd who lost one sheep, the woman who lost a single small coin, for we just might relate to the people in the third parable that is about human beings can treat one another. Will we have compassion on others whose behavior we have not much liked ...? Will we have compassion and welcome them when they seek to change ...? Will we sit down and eat with them, rejoice with them, when they seek to become different ...? Will we forgive ...?

For God is always willing to forgive the penitent, those who are willing to change. St Paul tells us today that we are ‘ambassadors for Christ’, which must mean that the compassion of God needs to become more and more our compassion, the willingness of God to forgive needs to become more and more a willingness that is also ours.

God forgives; God in Christ Jesus forgives; and we ourselves can forgive –just forgive—and forgiveness can change our worlds Amen.