

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Year C - 31/3/2019

Joshua 5:2-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:11-32

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

In a parallel universe, at another St. Andrew's in which I ministered - namely, St. Andrew's, Brighton, in the Diocese of Melbourne, the large sanctuary is dominated by one over-riding feature. Taking up the majority of the northern wall of the church, behind the high altar (which is itself 12 feet long) is a sculpture. Fashioned from bronze coloured metal, it is just over 11 feet tall, and depicts 2 figures - one long-haired person cradling the other obviously male figure dressed just in a loincloth - my first instinct when I saw it for the first time was that it was Mary, cradling the body of her son, Jesus, perhaps after he had been taken down from the cross, or maybe, I imagined, on his walk to Golgotha.

However, I was quickly informed that this was in fact a depiction of the return of the prodigal son. It was installed in 1987, the new church's twenty fifth anniversary. The prodigal son. It seems that everyone has their own take on this famous parable, and this particular image of the father, hugging, weeping down the face of his long-lost son is indeed a powerful one, and perhaps sums up for me better than any other parable of Jesus that great mystery of salvation offered by God.

Our Lenten Study challenged us this week to consider whether our church considers the suffering of God's people as some sort of testing by God or, worse still, a sort of punishment from God for our being weak or faithless. My response to that question would be to acknowledge that there are some parts of the church which emphasize the act of crucifixion as being the way in which our sin was borne on the cross by Jesus.

And some of these people will even want to take it further and say that this was an act demanded by an angry God who demanded punishment for the sin of the people and who therefore sent Jesus for that express purpose.

It will probably not surprise you to know that I struggle with this notion of our salvation or atonement so narrowly understood as just the suffering and death of Jesus, or more importantly that this act was required by God as some sort of payment. Because, actually, if that is the case, then I have to ask the question, “why did Jesus tell this parable that we hear today”?

Think about it - if God really could not forgive humanity for their sinfulness and evil - if God actually required payment for that sin in the act of sending his own son to die, then today’s parable doesn’t make sense. I know we should be wary about taking a parable and being so direct as to assign “parts” or “roles” to characters in the story. But it is widely understood that the person or nature of God is seen in the character of the father in Luke’s story.

So, I ask you - how would this story today really finish if we hold the view that God is a God who keeps score; who keeps count; who requires that compensation be made? However such a story might end, I think we can all agree that it would *not* end up with the scene depicted in that sculpture in St. Andrew’s Brighton.

No - “God” would not run down the driveway, casting aside all dignity and self-respect, to embrace and weep over a lost son **before he has even expressed any sort of regret for his actions!! Surely?**

I have a suspicion that what makes the view of the cross as substitutionary punishment appealing for some is that in our human minds and experiences it all appears to add up. We have sin that demands punishment. Jesus is righteous and can take that punishment for us. God’s justice is upheld and, indeed, the whole thing is set in motion because God loves us and doesn’t want to have to punish us at all.

This theory (at that level) makes sense. God's righteous anger at sin is satisfied and God's love for humanity is also satisfied in that God didn't have to condemn humans to a payment we could never make and punishment we could not endure. It is, in short, an accountant's dream.

But as important as counting is, sometimes it just doesn't work. Especially in relationships. I mean, imagine counting every good thing someone did for you and using that to judge how much they love you. Or imagine keeping track of every unhelpful or hurtful thing people in your life do to you and demanding payment. (Worse, imagine *them* demanding payment from *you* for your mistakes!)

It just doesn't work. And so the father in Jesus' parable does something which wealthy landowners of that day would never do. He runs out to meet his wayward son the minute he spies him coming from afar. He doesn't send a servant. He doesn't wait for his son to come. He dashes down the road like no respectable landowner ever would, making a complete fool of himself.

Why? Why in the world, after all, would he be so eager to see a son who claimed his inheritance early (which is kind of like he said he couldn't wait for his dad to be dead) and then wasted it all. Not only that, the father doesn't even give his son a chance to explain or repent but interrupts his speech and instead embraces and restores him immediately.

This landowner doesn't care how he acts, or what others might think because he's a parent before he's a landowner and so he doesn't count all the wrongs his son has done him but only tries to count his lucky and innumerable stars when his son comes back.

Prodigal - talk about a Prodigal Father - talk about a Prodigal God!! Luke's well-known (and some might even say well-worn!) parable reminds us this week that God loves us - fiercely, vulnerably, courageously...and unendingly.

Whether we have wasted opportunity after opportunity or have been quietly working away faithfully and wondering when we'll be noticed (like the older brother in the story), God loves us.

Whether you have welcomed others who are down and out or have judged others for not measuring up, God loves you. Whether I think this news is the best in the world or barely notice it, yet God loves me. No matter the cost, God loves us.

T. S. Eliot wrote this: "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." These words speak the truth of our parable today. The prodigal son, who had been out in the far country "squandering his property" is now in his father's arms re-substantiated. Upon arriving at that same farm from which he had shaken the dust off his feet and abandoned his family, he comes there again and feels the unyielding love of his father, and he sees home again for the first time.

That lasting image of the father cradling his son might well serve for us as an example, a reminder - maybe even an inspiration or even a relief - that God does not count our brokenness and somehow keep score. But rather welcomes us each and every time we return - back into loving arms of Grace that hold us tight...

The Lord be with you.