

Readings for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

30th March 2025

First Reading: Joshua 5:9-12

After the Israelites had crossed the Jordan river, 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.

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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 no longer know him 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 God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Gospel: St Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 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 region, 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.' "

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

Today we come to the fourth Sunday in Lent, which most of us know as Mothering Sunday – a day of rejoicing for many but a day that is dreaded by others, mainly because, in our society, it has morphed into Mothers' Day, a secular celebration of all things maternal, which simply doesn't work for lots of people for all sorts of reasons.

As you may well know, another name for this day in the church is 'Refreshment Sunday', a day of celebration just over half-way through Lent when the rigours of Lenten discipline and fasting are lightened. Tradition has it that, in mediaeval times, it was usual to return one's 'mother church' on this day, which could be the church one was baptised in, or the local parish church, or the diocesan cathedral. Later, it became a day when, supposedly, domestic servants were given time off to return to families and their mother church, picking flowers from the hedgerows along the way. Quite how often this actually happened in practice is somewhat lost in the mists of time.

The whole of Lent is a season of returning. As I mentioned last week, the first step in repentance is turning back to God. In the daily office books, which the clergy and others use for morning and evening prayer, the theme for Lent is given as 'Returning to God'. And we see this theme of returning and reconciliation with God in all our readings today, but particularly clearly in the parable we know as that of the prodigal son. It's also known as the parable of the lost son, or the parable of the two sons, or the parable of the forgiving father, and we can see elements of all these titles in the story. We can see a forgiving God in the father figure, we can see ourselves in the repentant son who sees the error of his ways and returns to his father. Perhaps we see ourselves less easily in the figure of the elder brother who has always done what is right and feels that he deserves more than his repentant brother.

The artist, Rembrandt, was apparently very affected by this parable and made many representations of it in different media, culminating in his 1660's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, which some regard as his greatest work. In the 18th century, the painting was acquired by Catherine the Great of Russia and, to this day, hangs in The Hermitage in St Petersburg.

The painting depicts the moment of return. The prodigal son is shown kneeling before his father in a wretched state, dirty and dressed in rags, one foot bare and wounded. His is an attitude of abject repentance and humility. He is embraced by his father, richly dressed, who has both hands on his son's shoulders as if drawing him to himself, his face looking down in compassion and love. The older brother is to the side, also looking down at the younger son, his expression difficult to read, his arms crossed in an attitude perhaps of judgement but certainly not of welcome. In the background are two other shadowy figures, witnesses to the return.



In the 1980s, the Dutch theologian and priest, Henri Nouwen, who was fascinated by this painting, had the remarkable opportunity of spending two days contemplating the painting. Out of this experience came his book of the same name, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The book's subtitle, *A Story of Homecoming*, reflects again the idea of returning to God.

I first read this book well over a decade ago, and one part of it has always remained with me; it is Nouwen's description of the father's hands as they embrace his wayward son. For Nouwen, the hands reveal that the father in this painting is much more than a wise old patriarch of the family who forgives his son. Nouwen writes:

'The two [hands] are quite different. The father's left hand touching the son's shoulder is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the prodigal son's shoulder and back. ... That hand seems not only to touch, but, with its strength, also to hold. Even though there is a gentleness in the way the father's left hand touches his son, it is not without a firm grip.

How different is the father's right hand! This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and very tender. The fingers are close to each other and have an elegant quality. It lies gently upon the son's shoulder. It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand.'

This led Nouwen to an understanding of the father-figure representing God as both father and mother, protecting the vulnerable side of the son as well as reinforcing him in his desire to repent and reform his life. The attitude of the father, bent over the son reminded him of the sheltering wings of a mother bird and of Jesus' words about wishing

to gather the people as a mother hen gathers her chicks. This is the care and protection that God offers to those who return. The return of the prodigal son is our return to God as the very origin of our being.

Nouwen continues: 'The mystery, indeed, is that God in her infinite compassion has linked herself for eternity with the life of her children. She has freely chosen to become dependent on her creatures, whom she has gifted with freedom. This choice causes her grief when they leave; this choice brings her gladness when they return. But her joy will not be complete until all who have received life from her have returned home and gather together around the table prepared for them.'

'Mothering' is a verb, and Mothering Sunday is a celebration of the mutual love, care and nurture that is given and received in families of all sorts, including the family of the church, as we reflect God's love for us to one another. All those close relationships that bring us through both the sorrows and joys of life. But, above all, it is about our choosing to return in humility to God who, as both father and mother, loves, consoles, comforts, strengthens and encourages us.