

Preparing for the Returning Prodigal

Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Our Gospel reading this morning is one of the most familiar of Jesus stories. It was told by him to emphasise the value of each individual to God, even the ones, which had strayed from God's path. Poignant also is the reminder to us of the Son who remained in the fold, for there is the danger for us to see God's favour on another as unfair, in spite of his generosity on us. Indeed, there is a thread through Jesus teaching that points to God's favour on the undeserving, as not being a sign that the deserving have lost favour.

The returning prodigal is an image that we would do well to adopt as a church, not only because it reminds us that in one way or another, we are all prodigals that have returned to find a waiting father, but that this is our mission and message - that God is waiting for each person to respond to the call and to return. Our job is to make it easy for the prodigal to return and to point others in the direction of the waiting father.

This ought to be our corporate way of life as well as the way we individually live. Reflect on the story for a moment. Could anyone insult a father more than to say - Give me my inheritance. Think of the problem on the farm today if one third of the assets would be sold and given away? Think of what he was saying to his father - I wish you were dead!

Yet in graciousness, the father did not seek to hold him. He allowed him that freedom to fail. He knew not the outcome, but he suspected the worst, but he let him go none the less. And as he left the farm for the city and the bright lights, he was like the one who had died, for he left the family.

But there is a powerful image, that when this young man realised what he had given up, and what he had done, and made that humbling trip home - There was the father waiting and watching. Did he know he would come back? No - but he hoped he would, and the eyes of hope stared down the road each day, scrutinising each traveller, until beyond all hope he saw the one who was dead, and could not be angry, but could only be overwhelmed with Joy.

Jesus shows us the difference between the Father's abundant mercy and the usual human reaction to the sinner. The older son represents the people we call "good". He refuses to forgive—is jealous and bitter—his devotion to his father appears to be motivated by self-interest—he even disowns his brother. The older brother had a point, but he did not share the joy of the father and missed the celebration.

I hope that this church and this parish will a place of return; a place, where men, women, boys and girls, can discover the call to return to God. To find that the path of life lived outside God's will no matter how good it begins is meaningless, and that life only has meaning in God. And there are many with whom we rub shoulders day by day, whose path is to the care pigs in an alien land.

So how is it that we should respond?

We ourselves must be the beacon. Our lives should point the way for the traveller. We should be living in such a way that those who are trying to live without Jesus we be challenged about what it is that they are missing. This is not about confrontation, or going and saying, "look at me and what I have" with the sense of pride.

No, to win others we must saturate our lives in Christ that they can see the lack in their own. It is not that we tell them, but rather that in looking at the way we live, that they are aware of something missing.

And it means that we must be prepared for change as well. Any new person will change us as they join our fellowship, but this should be the normal pattern of events of our congregational life. Change not for the sake of change, but because we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. It will never be comfortable to welcome back to the fold those who have strayed, but unless we do, we like the older brother will miss the party.

God awaits our return to Him from the sins of the flesh (younger son) and from the sins of the attitudes (older son). No one is beyond His forgiveness.

He wants to make our return easy — He comes to meet us. He wants us to share in a lasting celebration of joy and peace in His presence.

All we have to do is to be willing to return — to "leave this place and return to my Father".

So let us pray that God will begin his work here with us making you and I the kind of people that he wants to welcome the stranger, the returning prodigal on his behalf. Let this be part of our process of self-review on our journey to Easter. I believe, that when we become the people that God wants us to be, then we will see the harvest that God is earnestly waiting for.

AMEN