

Sunday 10th March 2013 Cathedral, Grahamstown 8.30 a.m. (Annual Vestry) 7 p.m. (Student Service)		4th Sunday in Lent – Year C Mothering Sunday Annual Vestry Meeting Student Service	
Joshua 5:9-12	Psalm 32	2 Cor 5:16-21	
		Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32	
Coming home			

Today after this service we shall be having our Annual Vestry Meeting. Vestry is like the Annual General Meeting – the AGM – of an organisation. We get an overview of what has been happening over the past year. We report on the finances. We elect churchwardens and parish council. And we ask ourselves – How are we doing? Are we on the right track? Are we being faithful to our calling? If you are a parishioner, a member of the Cathedral, please attend Vestry.

Today is also Mothering Sunday, when we honour the cathedral as the mother church of the diocese; and when we honour and give thanks for our mothers, and all who play a mothering role in our lives. At the end of the service, there will be posies for all our mothers as we leave the church, made and handed out by our junior youth. A very big thank you to our junior youth for these. Mothers, please take a posy.

The 1973 song, “Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree” is the story of an ex-convict, a prisoner, just released from prison. He is on his way home – but will his beloved receive him? Want to see him again? He writes to her, and asks her to tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree outside their home, if she is willing to take him back. The bus on which the ex-prisoner is travelling will drive past the tree; if he sees a ribbon, he will get off the bus; if not, he will travel on and never return. As the bus comes closer to his home, the ex-prisoner is anxious, frightened, and asks the bus driver to look for him. Suddenly the whole darn bus is cheering, he can’t believe what he sees – a hundred yellow ribbons round the old oak tree. He gets off the bus. He has come home.

1st POINT – The prodigal son

The parable of the prodigal son is a story about coming home, and finding a welcome.

“There was a man who had two sons.” The younger son, we discover, is the prodigal – someone who is recklessly wasteful. If you spend your money lavishly as if there is no tomorrow, or waste your time (even in the face of that urgent assignment) as if there are no deadlines, you are being prodigal.

The younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, takes it and leaves, and in a far-off country spends all he has until there is nothing left.

Many young people, after they have left school, long to leave home and go off into the big wide world to explore, to find themselves, to grow up, to stand on their own feet, to become independent of their families. But the younger son has done more than this. In the culture of that time, by asking for his share of his inheritance before his father had died, he has insulted his father and the whole family. He has wanted his father dead so that he can get his father’s money. Then he takes what is his, and goes to a far distant country – he turns his back on his upbringing, the values and heritage that shaped him, the community that watched over him. It is a radical rejection of everything good that had made him and formed him.

There in the far distant country, he wastes what he has been given. He squanders his gifts, his money, his life, throws it all away – until he has nothing left. He finds a job looking after pigs – a revolting and distasteful job for a Jew. Even then he has no food. Finally, in desperation, he comes to his senses, and decides to return home.

The younger son represents someone who has turned his back on all that is good – has turned his back on God – has walked away from his

heritage and his culture. Sometimes we need to do that – to re-evaluate who we are, to reflect on the things that drive us, the things that control us – and the culture that has shaped us. Too often people say “It’s my culture” as an excuse for their behaviour. “It’s my culture” is used to justify the way men treat women. We have to ask – is it something about South African male culture, that results in such a high rate of rape, abuse and domestic violence? Surely we need to walk away and leave behind us a culture in which women and girls are not safe – and develop a new culture which says, “Real men don’t rape.”

But this young man had walked away from what was good. He has squandered, wasted his gifts, his life. He needed to find his way back to his father, back home – and there to discover that he was a beloved son, welcomed by his father. And it’s a journey you and I, all of us, need to make as well – the journey back to God, to discover the love that waits for us at the heart of God – love that welcomes us and embraces us and holds us – back to the place where we know that at the deepest level of our being, we are sons, daughters, of God. We belong to God. And the journey home starts as we ask – have we squandered, wasted what we have been given?

2nd POINT – the older brother

In contrast, the older brother appears to be the one in the right. He has never rebelled. He has never squandered or wasted his father’s gifts. He has worked hard, served loyally all his life. He is the faithful one. We can be quite critical of him – we may see him as the conformist, the one afraid to leave the nest, to step out of the boat, afraid to take risks. And he is the first-born - how many of us are first-borns, with an added sense of responsibility, the cares of the world upon us, devoted to our duty, to doing what is right, to keeping the show on the road?

But sadly, as close as the older brother was to his father, serving him, with him, he had not yet realised how much he was loved; he had not yet been embraced by his father’s love; he had not yet developed his

father's heart of compassion. When the younger brother returns and is welcomed back with open arms, the older brother reacts with resentment and anger. Although he had not left home in rebellion, he also needed to return to the heart of his Father.

Are some of us like the older brother? We may have served God faithfully and with devotion for much of our lives. Yet do we carry resentment and jealousy? The feeling that others have had it easy, while we have slaved away? – and what, we might ask ourselves, have we gained from it all?

3rd POINT – the father

Whether we are like the younger brother, squandering, wasting our lives, or whether we are like the older brother, we are invited to return to the Father. In the parable, he has given his younger son the freedom to go off; he waits with prayer and longing and hope for the young man to finally return home. He watches, and when he sees the young man far off, he runs to welcome him. He gives his son the signs of belonging, the signs that he was a son – shoes (slaves and servants went barefoot), the ring of authority, the finest robe – like the abakwethu who return from their circumcision to receive new clothes, as new people, young men; and a feast of welcome, to celebrate. At Sunday School one day, this parable was read to the group of children, and the teacher then asked, “Who do you think was unhappy when the younger son returned?” One child answered, “The fatted calf!”

The Father is a picture of God, who has given his Son that we might have life, who loves us not because we deserve it, or have earned his love, but because that is the nature of God – to reach out and to embrace.

Our journey to the heart of God is to receive that love; and in turn for us to become like the father who embraces his lost younger son, who speaks words of gentleness and wisdom to his older son, and who has compassion.

CONCLUSION

The feast of the Eucharist is the celebration party that the Father throws because we have returned. The fatted calf that is slaughtered, the food we share – the body and blood of Christ. We return from the far distant country; we leave behind our resentments and anger, our jealousy; we are born again, made new people; all the sadness and loss and grief and pain of our broken world is brought here, is offered up here, receives healing and new life here, in the embrace and the heart of God. We have come home.

Let us make that journey in our hearts back to the heart, the love of God.

Let us as a Cathedral in our life together reflect and show forth the love and embrace and compassion of God.