

Sunday 6th March 2016 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		4th Sunday in Lent Mothering Sunday
Joshua 5:9-12	Psalm 32	2 Corinthians 5:16-21
		Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION		

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding people’s misdeeds against them, and has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.” (2 Cor 5:17)

The parable of the prodigal son

The story of the father with his two sons – the parable of the prodigal son – is, according to Henri Nouwen¹, a story of homecoming. There are many ways we can reflect on it, and no one sermon can do justice to the many layers, the depths, of this parable. We have in front of us a copy of Rembrandt’s painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Nouwen writes extensively about this painting in his extended meditation both on the painting, and the parable.

There are three central characters in the story. One way of allowing God to speak to us through this parable is to identify with one of the characters.

Perhaps we identify with the father. We see ourselves as a caring, hands-on father, mother, grandparent. We have cared with hard work and sacrifice for our darling children, our family. We have protected them through ups and downs; we have loved them dearly. But things haven’t gone well. Perhaps we have felt disappointed, hurt, betrayed, by our child’s behaviour. There may be drugs, alcohol, an unwanted pregnancy. We have a wayward son or daughter; we are desperately concerned about their well-being; but they are in a far-distant country, either physically or spiritually, out of our reach – and all we can do is pray for them and watch and hope for their return.

¹ *The Return of the Prodigal Son. A story of homecoming.*

All of us who are parents, grandparents, all who care and protect, we know what it is for our hearts to break over our darling children. We want the best for them, but we don't always know how to help. But at the end of the day, we know that whatever happens, we love them, and we will accept and receive them back. We welcome. We forgive. We embrace. And when we do that, we are a picture of God, who cares deeply for us, who waits for our return, and when we do return, God welcomes us and forgives us and restores us. Are you the forgiving father?

Perhaps we identify with the younger son. We grew up in the family home. But the time came when we took our inheritance – all that we have been given, all that we had learned – and we decided to walk off, perhaps in anger, turned our back on family, on our roots, turned away from God. We ended up spiritually, socially, in a far distant country. At first things seemed to go well. But after a while, our supplies ran out – and we ended up with the pigs, hungry, desperate, empty. We came to our senses, decided to return – and to our astonishment instead of being punished by our father, we were embraced, loved, restored, forgiven.

Perhaps there are some younger sons amongst us this morning – we might be physically present here in the cathedral, but in our minds and in our spirits we are lost; we are in a distant land. Today God reminds us, calls us, to return, to find our way back, to rediscover God's love for each one of us. Are you the younger son?

Perhaps we identify with the older son. We have been faithful, and loyal and hardworking all our life. We have always done what is right. We have shown ourselves to be trustworthy, a person of integrity. But we feel that we are not appreciated; all our efforts are ignored or dismissed; our achievements go unnoticed. We do our best, but nobody takes any notice. We have poured our life into building something up; now others are destroying our life's work. We are tired. We are angry. We have not run off like the younger son, but inside we

are full of resentment and jealousy and bitterness. We also need to be reconciled with the father. Are you the older son?

Reconciliation

In the parable, we are given a picture of reconciliation. God invites us to be reconciled. What does that mean? To be reconciled means that we change from being enemies to being friends. To be reconciled with God is to return to God. Reconciliation is what happens when two people sit down and make peace. When the younger son returns home and asks forgiveness, and his father receives him and welcomes him, it is the start of reconciliation. When we reach out and make peace with our enemy, and commit to rebuild the relationship, restore the friendship, that is reconciliation. When a family sits down and sort out their differences, and are able to make peace - that is reconciliation.

St Paul writes about reconciliation in our second reading: “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... we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor 5:19-20).

What does this show us? 1. Reconciliation – where enemies become friends – is at the heart of God; it is at the heart of what Jesus did in his death on the cross. 2. In Christ, God has reached out to the whole world, to turn us from being enemies of God, to being his friends – to restore the relationship. 3. God has entrusted this message and ministry of reconciliation to us – to invite others to receive this gift of a healed relationship with God. 4. Be reconciled to God – an invitation, an appeal.

What changes when there is reconciliation? What happens when the younger son returns home and is forgiven? When we return to God? When we make peace with one another? We become new people. We are transformed. We are born again. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17)

When we are new people, when we are restored to our relationship with God and with one another, when are changed inwardly – then we begin to behave differently to one another. If the person I hated and feared is no longer my enemy, but is now my friend, my brother or sister in Christ, then I am going to treat them differently. I am going to enter into their world, into their lives. If they are suffering or in despair, or in need, I am not going to turn my back on them. Instead, I am going to reach out to them and do all I can to help them - just as Christ did: sharing our pain, entering into our sufferings, reaching out hands of healing. “For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin...” (2 Cor 5:21).

The word for us today is an invitation to return, like the younger son, and be reconciled with God. Perhaps we are in a far-off country, and need to find our way back home, back to God, back to the place of love and healing and belonging. If you are the younger son, I invite you to make that journey and come home.

It is an invitation to be the reconciler, like the father, who forgave his son. Can we do that? Can we be icons of forgiveness and generosity and welcome? Are we willing to accept and embrace, especially across the generations? Across the divides of race and age and sexuality?

It is a call to reclaim the role of reconcilers in our community, on campus, in our country: to be peacemakers. Reconciliation has a bad press in some circles these days. It is seen as a cop-out; a way of avoiding the real issues, simply painting over the cracks, making peace but not addressing the real causes of pain and anger. But if we are to root ourselves in the reconciling work of Christ, and be instruments of reconciliation, then we make possible the healing of our country. There is some fearful talk going round at this time: talk of “everything must fall” – that all structures should be destroyed and that we should build our society from scratch; talk of current tensions sliding into outright violence, deaths, and civil war; growing extremism, verbal attacks, threats, palpable hatred, seething anger.

That is not the way of Christ. We have the ministry and message of reconciliation. It may well be the way of the cross. Let us continue to pray, continue to reach out, continue to make for peace.

Preparation for Vestry

I want to end with some questions and thoughts as we prepare for Vestry next Sunday:

How can we as the Cathedral be a community of reconciliation - bringing people together, listening to one another, hearing and sharing one another's pain, bearing one another's burdens, forgiving one another, breaking down barriers of distrust or suspicion or misunderstanding?

How can we as the Cathedral be a home for all?

Who is God calling to serve?

Who are the people amongst us with a vision for the Cathedral; people of wisdom and love and compassion? People who will build unity? People who can nurture and build up younger leadership? People who can strengthen and encourage the life of the Cathedral through the work of our parish council? Who are the people who can make our parish council an icon, a role model, of what we are called to be as people of God in our relationships with one another?

CONCLUSION

Richard Rohr puts it like this: "God isn't looking for servants [or] slaves... God simply wants mirroring images of God to live on this earth and to make the divine visible. That is, of course, the way love works. It always overflows, reproduces and multiplies itself."²

² *The Shape of the Universe is Love.* <https://cac.org/the-shape-of-the-universe-is-love-2016-02-29>

May God bless us as we do all we can to be people of love, and people of reconciliation.

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March 2016