

30 March 2025 -Lent 4 A Reflection Rev Wayne Toleafoa

INCREDIBLE LOVE – The Prodigal Son

Readings: Joshua 5:9-12, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The common thread running through our three lectionary readings today is that God's love is steadfast and unwavering.

All three readings also contrast a life in 'slavery' with the new life which God gives to those who believe in God's goodness.

In the first reading Joshua 5:9-12, the Israelites have just entered the Promised Land (Canaan) at a place they named 'Gilgal' which means 'rolled away'.

They have rolled away their sad history of slavery in Egypt and are starting a new chapter of freedom, in their journey.

We heard last week from Rev Simon McLeay, how Joshua ordered the tribal leaders to place a pile of stones at the pivotal place where they crossed over the River Jordan. The cairn of stones acted as a memorial to their new freedom – a memorial to God's goodness...

They are now in a new homeland, able to harvest their first crops. There is no more need for the floury substance called 'manna' which they ate in the desert. From now on it was fresh produce: vegetables and fresh grain to make their fresh and tasty bread. They could now plant vineyards and raise livestock.

It was a time to celebrate God's goodness - and they did this by celebrating the Passover – the Passover Feast – the symbol of their liberation

Most of us know the importance of ritual celebrations, whether they be birthdays, anniversaries, and other significant days.

We celebrate these days to remind us of how fortunate we are. Your birthday, or your anniversary is not just another day! It's a reminder of how fortunate you are.

Our reading from St Paul's Second Letter to the Church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 5:16-21) focuses on what happens when a person believes in Christ. They become a new creation. Their old life dies with Christ and they rise again (as it were) with the Risen Christ.

Like the Children of Israel entering the Promised Land, the new believer is casting off their old life – and is entering the kingdom of heaven (on earth) where God reigns.

The new believer will no longer be living in 'Egypt', the place of their slavery . They are now free. Christ has made all things new through his death on the cross.

In Paul's words:

¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

Therefore, says Paul, there is an onus on the new believer (on us), to share this good news with other people.

That God was in Christ reconciling, 'bringing together' the world and God.

Our gospel reading is the well-known Parable of the Prodigal Son, or the Parable of The Father's Love. Also called the Parable of the Two Brothers. Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

One stand-out thing about Jesus, in the gospels, was his ability to tell memorable stories. Stories that survive because they are so revealing about the human character.

A second stand out feature of Jesus was his ability to attract all kinds of people - especially people who were regarded as 'outsiders' by the religious people of his time.

If Jesus was walking our streets today, he would attract people from all walks of life, and from all religions and probably attract people of no religion.

Jesus was what Richard Rohr called, 'The Universal Christ' someone who inhabits the truth or the goodness in every culture and in every religion. Someone who inhabits the truth in every individual. St John in his prologue called it, 'the light that lights every person who comes into the world'.

In Maori culture it is described as the 'mauri', or the life force. The spirit that is in everything that exists.

It's one of the sad handicaps of organized religion, that we often create 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. It is more pronounced in some churches than in others.

Jesus attracted 'outsiders' – people who the synagogue, or the church would not count among their members.

We know the stories of Jesus dining with tax-collectors (who were often corrupt). Speaking with prostitutes – one who splashed her perfume all over him and wiped his feet with her tears. Mixing with foreigners and healing them and their relatives, as he did with the Syro-Phoenician woman and the Roman Centurion.

The picture the gospels paint of Jesus, is the portrait of a wonderful man with a huge heart for people no matter who they were. A man for whom there were no outsiders. Everyone (to Jesus) was an Insider.

And that makes me feel comfortable because I've often felt like an Outsider for several reasons; my race, my socio-economic status, the stereo-types that people have of ministers and priests.

I know that if Jesus was here this morning, He would welcome my friendship and the friendship of all of you. No matter who you are.

Luke tells us that the Pharisees, deeply religious people of Jesus' time, people who loved God - began to 'grumble' about Jesus because he was dining with tax gatherers and sinners. Outsiders.

What else do religious people grumble about? 'Outsiders' of course, and the way that other people behave. We are good at grumbling about the behaviour of others.

The pharisees began to grumble. Asking the question, 'Is Jesus 'one of us'? Or is he an outsider?'

When Jesus heard them grumbling about him, he told them one of the most profound parables in the whole Bible, 'The Parable of God's Steadfast Love' a.k.a. 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son'.

You know the story. A man had two sons. The younger son asks for his inheritance in advance. Takes his bag of money, travels to a far country and spends his inheritance on loose living. Ends up working at a pig farm where he comes to the realization that he had a great life living back home.

He decides to go back home, apologize to his father, and ask his father for a job as a hired worker.

Before he reaches the homestead, he sees his father running out to meet him with open arms. He feels his father's loving embrace and is welcomed home with a great celebration. His rags swapped for brand new clothes and a gold ring.

His older brother hears the celebration, refuses to come in and celebrate, until his father tells him a few home truths:

He, as the older brother was set to inherit everything and had access to everything. His brother on the other hand, had spent his inheritance on careless living.

He was 'dead' and now had come to life again. He was lost and now was found.

The Parable of course was directed at the Pharisees (the older brothers). They were given access to all the spiritual treasures of heaven, but they prevented all outsiders from coming in – even those who repented and tried to return to God the Father.

The power of the parable is of course that we, the listeners/readers are forced to try and 'locate' or identify ourselves within the parable.

Who are 'we' in the parable?

Are we the Prodigal who comes to himself. Realizes that God's goodness has blessed him all of his life?

Or are we the resentful older brother – seeing our sister or brother as an undeserving 'Outsider'?

Or are we the Father with his steadfast love towards all people - regardless of their faults?

The Parable 'The Prodigal Son' has been described as 'The gospel within the gospel'.

If the whole Bible was lost, or destroyed and this one Parable was all that survived – this parable would tell us all we need to know about the message of the gospel – that God loves us and wants us to love our sisters and brothers.

The hardest part of the parable to understand is 'the father's incredible Love'. The love that runs out to meet us...

Jesus would have us (and the Pharisees) believe that God's love surrounds us at every moment of the day, even when we have distanced ourselves from God. Jesus would have us believe that God runs out to meet us when we turn towards God.

It is an incredible picture of God which takes time to digest - especially if you are religious and you've relied on your own goodness to get you through life.

God running out to meet us and bringing us home...

As the well-known hymn by Charles Wesley describes it, 'Love divine – all loves excelling... Joy of heaven, to earth come down...'

God's divine love shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

PRAYER

Loving God, even as we wander far from You,
You plant in our hearts the reminder that we can return.
Help us to bring You all our faults and failings,
and open our eyes to the ways we have failed to work with You,

and turned our back on Your desires and designs for our happiness and flourishing.
For the times we have walked or run away,
for the times we have refused to come home,
and for the times we have resented others' homecomings,
we are sorry, and we humbly ask for Your forgiveness now.
Through Christ Brother and Saviour Amen.