



Sunday before Lent

THE NEW SHOFAR

For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.

The Loving Father and the Prodigal Son

This bloke welcomes sinners and eats with them!

Our reflections on the Gospel could well begin with today's psalm. It is a song of joy. Our psalmist has had an experience of salvation, of being forgiven by God and goes to the Temple to offer prayers and sacrifices of thanksgiving. Not only that, he sets out to share his experiences with others. If God can forgive this sinful individual, then all sinners can take heart. He reminds his fellow Israelites of their need to pray: *God be merciful to me a sinner!* It is a message taken up by Paul in his letter to the Church in Rome...*Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*

God, by nature, is a God of forgiveness

As our scriptures proclaim, forgiveness is offered to every person, pardon is not given to everyone. Those who remain stubborn and unrepentant cannot find forgiveness; not can those who refuse to believe in and trust in the forgiving kindness of God. There are those who are unwilling to accept their own guilt, their own sinful behaviour and remain blind to wrongdoing. And then there is the even more challenging warning – those who cannot forgive others cannot find forgiveness from God.

God seeks to restore humanity to grace

The overall message of scripture is how all men and women are open to the reality of sinning. Adam and Eve highlighted this through their own sinful actions. They chose themselves over God. Overcome by hubris, they sought to live as gods in their own world rather than as creatures in a universe created by God. Their sin is the mother of all sins, in that sinful human actions all reflect this same arrogance – *I am responsible to myself and no other!*

With the call of Abram and the story of Israel, what we see God doing is working to restore all peoples to an Eden-like existence; a life where men and women live together in peace, harmony and joy in an environment with which they are one. What makes Eden into a "paradise" is the central place God has as the source of this wonderful existence. It is not the abundance of food, plants and good things. It is God and God alone who can enable men and women to be the creatures they were created to be, the people God wanted them to be. To be fully human; to be fully alive is to live in God.

The Loving Father yearns for the return of the prodigal son

Today's parable is commonly referred to as the *Parable of the Loving Father* rather than its older title: *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. The reason for this is profound. The most amazing part of the

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narrative is the loving generosity, mercy, kindness and concern shown by the father who had been so savagely slighted and hurt by the actions of a son he loved dearly. No Palestinian son would ever contemplate acting in such a way. Should he do what he had done and say the words revealed in the parable, he would have been killed on the spot! The father's actions here would have been ridiculed by other local men as being weak and for bringing the ridicule on all fathers. That son deserved to be executed in a brutal and public manner. Only then could the status quo be restored.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion

With this line we come to the heart of the parable. Well before the son has an opportunity to confess his sins, the father is responding with compassion and mercy. He appears to have been out watching for a return, anticipating the son coming to his senses and returning to his family home. His actions pick up the actions of the two earlier parables – *searching* and *seeking*. This is the nature of God. Even the seemingly innocent note *he ran* tells us much, as no older Middle Eastern man would run. It was not dignified and was not a reflection of his proper status. This father, however, does not care! What is uppermost in his mind is the joy and relief he has over the return of his lost son.

This joy is not just in the father's heart. It flows out into the way he now treats his repentant son – he is embraced, clothed in the robes appropriate to a member of the family; he is given a ring signifying his restoration as son, a feast and a community welcome. That boy is now far removed from where he had ended up as a consequence of his initial sinful actions. No longer is he eating pig swill. He is now feasting with his friends. He is, in genuinely biblical imagery, restored, once again to state of living in “Eden” where all are created to be living.

My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is now found!

Of course, for Luke, this earthly father is a symbol of God. The Heavenly Father is One who pursues sinners, who desires for sinners to be saved from themselves and restored to a life of harmony with their brothers and sisters and within the blessed Life of the Holy Trinity. Thus the contrast: this son who was **dead** – because of his sinful hubris - is now **alive**. The former condition is characterised as being a state where he was *eating swill* while the latter restored life is celebrated as being a *party with his father and his friends*.

For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners

The mission God began with the call of Abram reaches its high point with the sending of the Son, Jesus of Nazareth as our Christ (Messiah) and Saviour. The biblical story of Israel is the narrative of God's pursuit of men and women in the divine ministry of restoration. What God wants is for all peoples to live as one within the loving embrace of the Trinity and the way we can achieve this restored state is for us to become one in Christ, one with Christ. The Son is the only way back to the Father and it is in the Son we once again become true sons and daughters of God.

SHUB! But let us not forget our need to *repent!* While God wants all to be saved, not everyone is going to rejoice in the gift of salvation. We should remember our insights from the psalms... *forgiveness is offered to every person, pardon is not given to everyone*. Forgiveness flows from our willingness to sacrifice ourselves that we may live as one with Christ, collaborate in God's mission in the world, strive to turn our lives around and to move in new Spirit-driven directions.

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To be forgiven requires of us an acknowledgement of our actual sins. Not just admitting that we are sinners. That means nothing. We need to pin down our real sins. Confess our genuine acts of betrayal and arrogance. We need to be like the son in the parable and feel the pain and shame of our actions. Only then is repentance likely to be real, as in shame we will seek to amend our lives in grace.