

4th Sunday of Lent

The parable of the Prodigal Son is unique to St Luke's Gospel. It reflects St Luke's great interest on the healing aspect of Our Lord's ministry. The story is so familiar and so powerful it does not need retelling, but there are elements that strike us in a new way when we hear it told again.

In our second reading today we hear St Paul's wonderfully encouraging words to the people of Corinth, "For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here. It is all God's work. It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on his reconciliation." Christ took our sin on himself "so that in him we might become the goodness of God". Christ takes our sin upon himself and set us free, wiping the slate clean.

Our Lord tells this parable to bring home to us the completeness of the Father's forgiveness. The father had suffered greatly. In material terms he had seen part of the wealth he had built up in the family farm alienated. Perhaps he had hoped his two sons would work together in developing and extending it. The younger son lacked the patience to wait for his father's death and wanted that portion here and now. Instead of being a support as he got older, he had disappeared and squandered the money his father had spent a lifetime building up. As the months and years went by the father heard nothing from him, just rumours of a lifestyle that must have pained him. Yet he never stopped caring about him, or hoping that, one day, he would see him in the distance making his way home.

One day he sees him approaching. He runs out to meet him, embraces him, sends for new clothes and a ring, and gets his servants to organise a feast. He does not let the son complete the apology he had rehearsed. When the older son does not share his joy, the father is saddened. After all, the father has suffered far more than the older son. He could have turned the prodigal away, closing the door on him. He could have accepted him on his own terms as a servant, but without a place in his heart or home. He could have just let him resume his place without comment. Instead he goes overboard, and the prodigal is given a public welcome, and restored to his place, just as in the first reading the Israelites enter the Promised Land after forty years' wandering in the desert. They no longer need the gift of manna to sustain them. They eat of the fruit of the land.

Jesus tells this parable precisely to explain to the Pharisees and his other critics why he eats and drinks with sinners. He has come to redeem us – to save us from ourselves. He has come to make us anew, restoring the image and likeness of God within us. He does not offer us a second class place in the Kingdom but to restore us fully to our place in God's favour. St Paul speaks of a ministry of reconciliation. At Calvary Our Lord took on his shoulders the sins of the whole world until the end of time. At Easter he entrusted the apostles with the power to bring this forgiveness and reconciliation to people through all the ages to come – "Those sins you forgive, they are forgiven." This is what the sacrament of reconciliation is about. Our confession is laying our sins on his shoulders, and in return we hear Jesus say, "I absolve you from your sins". We are created anew, as free from sin as a newly baptised child. The people of Israel entered the Promised Land. Our reward is to receive the Body and Blood of Our Lord in the Eucharist as a sign and pledge of our place in the heavenly Kingdom.