

Words for the way, pastoral notes during Pandemic –The Prodigal Son

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Opening Prayer:

May the words which we hear and read, and upon which we meditate, speak to our hearts, our minds, and our souls. May God the Holy Spirit be with us here at this time and in this place. Amen

Joshua 5:9-12 (Today I have taken away the disgrace of Egypt)

Psalm 32 (happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven)

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (New Creations in Christ)

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (The Prodigal Son)

Difficult Relations

One of the sad pastoral matters that I have deal with as a minister and as a chaplain in the defence forces is the matter of family relationship breakdown. Relational breakdowns occur for a variety of reasons, but a common factor is our human brokenness, which has at its crux often an attitude of selfishness. “I want my own way and I am prepared to disregard the other.” Many a time I have heard spoken by one or more parties in dispute.

From where I sit, lamentably I often see hurting people, at times adults, and more sadly children. I see trusts betrayed. Friendships crushed, homes that were once safe and secure broken, confidences shattered, people despairing even to the point of contemplation of self-harm. The very souls of human beings damaged from behaviours that seeks self.

From time to time, I do see some hope however, on occasion; sometimes people who seek to be reconciled, be healed, and give their relationship a new start, a new chance, and thus end their estrangement. These people work hard to restore the brokenness and invest much effort to rebuild that what has been broken.

In these last months I have been working separately with three groups of people who have experienced conflict. This conflict has resulted in damage of their relationships.

As I listen to the stories, I hear a reoccurring theme:

1. Breach of promise
2. Breaking of trust
3. Betrayal

Just as those three 'Bs' I also hear the people explore solutions to their situations. This is where people want to rebuild their relationships, and effect healing. The following three qualities become a theme.

1. Contrition,
2. Forgiveness
3. Restoration of trust

During one of these rather difficult counselling sessions, I found myself telling yet again the story that Jesus told of the prodigal son.

In this Lenten season one of the key factors is to remember the forgiveness that Jesus brings.

Israel's Disgrace

In today's Revised Common Lectionary readings from the book of Joshua, one may find there a line a little puzzling:

"Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the place has been called Gilgal to this day. (v. 9)

The NIV uses the word 'reproach,' the NRSV uses the maybe more accurate word 'disgrace.' Think back to a narrative in the Book of Exodus. The Egyptians have forgotten Joseph and the Israelites are seen as nuisance. However, do not think of the Israelites too much as the pious poor victims of the horrible oppressive Egyptians. The closer truth is that the Israelites were quite happy and comfortable to live the Egyptian ways of life. They embraced Egyptian gods and forsook Yahweh, the God who created the universe and is the true and living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You may read clues to this in the complaints that the Israelites make to Moses, in the Book of Exodus. Israel needed to be forgiven, they need to restore relations with Yahweh before they entered the Promised Land. Think of this, we need forgiveness before we may enter the promised place that the Saviour prepares for us. Our disgrace needs to 'Gilgal'ed' or rolled away.

I am also reminded of the illustration used in the Old Testament of Israel's adulators or unfaithful nature to God. The Book of the Prophet Hosea is that very allegory.

Unpacking the Prodigal Son Parable

Let us now focus upon the Prodigal¹ Son. It comes from a series of what may be call the 'Lost and Found Parables.' One could argue however, that the Prodigal Son is the most powerful and full, in Jesus explaining the very nature of God's forgiveness.

The audience to the parable the Apostle Luke informs us are chiefly Pharisees, the teachers of the established Jewish faith. Please do not be too harsh in your judgment of these religious people, by and large they were men who knew the Scriptures, and did try very, very hard to be pleasing to God. In their attempts they did lose the plot sadly and often fell over the line to end up being hypocrites and a long way from pleasing God; an easy trap for anyone to fall into.

Let us recap the key points of the story:

- The younger son comes to his father with the most outrageous request.
- The father without argument acquiesces to this request.
- The younger son then goes off and quickly commences to enjoy the fast life. Some commentators suggest that he goes off to a place like Rome.
- The money quickly runs out, and the son is left destitute. An all too familiar story in any city around the world.
- He hatches the idea that he may return home but not as a son but as an employed hireling- a servant. He knows that he has no rights to be accepted back into the family.
- The father sees him coming from a long way off and runs toward him. I would suggest that the father was looking for him to come home.
- The father foregoes is dignity, he runs to meet the son.
- The father shows his love for his son he puts his arms around him, just as he is probably still fetid from the pig pen.
- He gives him his signet ring. This is the equivalent of handing over the family credit card. – He gives him access to finances when he has demonstrated that her has poor financial management abilities.
- He calls for a feast to celebrate the return of his son.
- Now the older son enters the scene. Note the venom on vv. 29, 30
- The power of the words in v 32².

Our lives are full of incidents where we could be either of the brothers. We may feel we are righteous, hard working. Yet we still not are accepting the grace of God. We

¹ Late Latin prodigalis, from Latin prodigus "wasteful," from prodigere "drive away, waste,"

² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Luke 15:32

may be like the younger brother taking our self-pleasing way and walk out on our loving, gracious heavenly Father.

Jesus told those stories for the benefit of all who seek to be right with God. It is through Christ that we may be made new. Paul writing to the struggling church in Corinth, strongly states this:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ³

This Lenten season can we come home to God; may we allow us to be made new creations through Christ the Saviour. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

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³ 2 Corinthians 5:17