

## *Words for the Way – Welcome Home Prodigal*

### *Lent IV*

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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)

One of the sad pastoral matters that I have had to 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 the one key common factor is our human brokenness. The brokenness often has its nub in selfishness. How often we have heard it said either directly or implied? “I want my own way, and I am prepared to disregard the other. How often may we have been also the very holder of that attitude? The infection of selfishness afflicts all humankind.

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 behaviour that seeks self.

From time to time, however, I do see some hope on occasion; sometimes people who seek to be reconciled, be healed, and give their relationship a new start, a new chance, and thus the end to their estrangement. In these last months I have been working separately with several groups of people who have experienced conflict, which has resulted in the cracking of their relationships. Some involving working relationships, some are neighbourhood relationships, and some are family relationships.

As I listen to these people’s earnest stories, I hear some reoccurring themes:

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

Just as those three ‘Bs’ I also hear the people seeking to explore solutions to their situations. This is where people want to rebuild their relationships and open a new chapter of their lives.

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 the parable that we have heard maybe for the umpteenth time, of The Prodigal Son<sup>1</sup>.

Before we focus upon the parable let us remind ourselves that we are in the Lenten season. One of the key factors to remember during this time is the forgiveness that Jesus brings to us.

In this morning's Revised Common Lectionary readings from the book of Joshua there may be a line a little puzzling to some but will ultimately shed some light for us on the matter:

**"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 of Israelites leaving Egypt in the Book of Exodus.

The Egyptians had forgotten Joseph, the Israelites were seen by the Egyptians as a nuisance interfering with their lives and country. However, we need to be a little careful that we do not think of the Israelites too much as pious victims of the horrible oppressive Egyptians and over sympathize. 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 with whom they were to live in the established covenant. The God who created the universe, and is the true and living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We read clues to this in the complaints that the Israelites make to Moses, in throughout the Book of Exodus. Israel needed to repent and be forgiven. They needed to restore relations with Yahweh before they were to be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Now think of this, we too need forgiveness before we may enter the promised place that the Saviour prepares for us.<sup>2</sup> Our disgrace needs to '*Gilgal'ed*' or rolled away to play with the wording from the book of Joshua.

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<sup>1</sup> From Middle French *prodigal*, from Late Latin *prōdigālis* ("wasteful"), from Latin *prōdigus* ("wasteful, lavish, prodigal"), from the verb: *prōdigō*

<sup>2</sup> See John 14:3

We may also be reminded of the illustration used in the Old Testament of Israel's adulterous or unfaithful nature toward God. The Book of the Prophet Hosea is that very allegory.

Let us now focus upon the Prodigal Son. It comes from a trilogy series of what may be call the 'Lost and Found Parables.' One could argue 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 Luke informs us, are chiefly Pharisees, the teachers of the established Jewish faith. Do not be too harsh and careful in your judgment of them. By and large, they were men who knew the Scriptures intimately and completely. They did try very, very, hard to be pleasing to God. In their attempts they did lose the plot sadly, often fell over the line to end up being hypocrites, and a long way from pleasing God; an easy trap for anyone, including us to fall into.

Now 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. Note the point that for a man to in a middle eastern kandora robe<sup>3</sup> is not possible. Thus, the father would have had to hitch up his skirt so to speak, exposing his legs. This was culturally

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<sup>3</sup> Kandora is a traditional Arabic garment for men. It is made from 1 piece of fabric and therefore has no sewn-on sleeves. The kandora is very popular in Middle Eastern countries and has a very practical function, especially during hot days, namely cooling.

awkward not something that a dignified older man would (and still today) do. However, it mattered not to the father. His son had come home!

- I would also suggest that the father was looking every day for the prodigal to come home. The father shows his love for his son he puts his arms around him, just as he is. Most likely still the Prodigal was still fetid from the pig pen where he had been working.
- The father gives the prodigal his signet ring. This is the equivalent of handing over the family credit card. In the ancient world – The father gives the prodigal access to the family finances, when the prodigal has clearly demonstrated that he has poor financial management abilities.
- The father takes away the Prodigal's disgrace.
- 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 32<sup>4</sup>.

Jesus told the story of just one family in his day. I would be quite prepared to suggest that this was not unique in Jesus' day and sadly still not unique in our time and place in the world.

Our lives are full of incidents where we could easily be either of the brothers. We may feel we are righteous, hard working. Yet we are still not accepting the grace of God. We may be like the younger brother taking our self-pleasing way and walk out on our loving, gracious heavenly Father. Or a mixture of both brothers.

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, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!**

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<sup>4</sup> 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

This Lenten season we have the opportunity to come home, come home to God through Christ. Can we allow ourselves to be made new creations through Christ our Saviour.? Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

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