

The fourth Sunday of Lent is rather unique; like the third Sunday of Advent, because today we have a break in an otherwise penitential season. The vestments for this day are rose, as they are on Gaudete Sunday in Advent, and flowers may adorn the Altar. This day is called Laetare Sunday or Rose Sunday, and takes its name from the opening words of the Introit – the opening words we heard today: “Laetare, Jerusalem.”

Throughout Lent we have not heard much rejoicing, rather we have heard of our need to repent. Why? So that we are not separated from the love of God. In the Gospel of Luke today we have a reprieve from all the repentance stories. In Jesus’s parable of the prodigal son we clearly learn that Jesus’s love is for all people. That is our model – God’s love for Jerusalem – Jerusalem – the mother of us all – and that is why in England this the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday is Mothering Sunday. Today – the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent – we can rejoice because God’s unconditional love is intended for everyone – just as Jesus taught and still teaches.

The parable of the prodigal son is probably one of the best known teachings of our Lord. It would have been told and told over and over in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. It still is often told today. It is rather like our own family stories that we tell and retell over the dining table when everyone is gathered. Remember when – we begin. I don’t often tell my prodigal son story, because it recalls a time of pain for Jim and me. In his last year of high school one of our sons left home one spring while we were at a week long out of town meeting. He did not return until the middle of the summer. He lived on the mean streets of Washington, D.C. for four months. 5 o’clock was the time when I would fall into despair not knowing if he had a place to sleep that night. At one point Jim convinced him to call around 5 to let me know he had a sofa to sleep on for the night. But finally – on my birthday – that July, he called and said he would like to have parents again. When he

came home we did celebrate. I cannot remember if we barbequed a fatted calf, but we surely went shopping for clothes – 20<sup>th</sup> century robes and sandals. He had lost most all his belongings along the way, but he had held onto a small wooden box with a mosaic of fish on it that I had given him. Inside were the few things that he treasured and a single lens reflex 35 mm Pentax camera that Jim had given him that he had used to document his journey. We have not yet heard all of his adventures. But, I suppose because we look very alike, for years after, street people would come up to me and ask if I had a really tall son, saying “He took my picture” and “He gave me his gloves one day.” Another homeless man said that he had given him his coat. Another said “I met him one morning when he was handing out bagels on the street corner.” That day he had bread enough to spare. But there were days when he didn’t know how he would survive. But, thanks be to God, he did. My son who was lost found his way home.

Where do we find ourselves in these two prodigal son stories? I find that by recalling my story about my own son’s return I feel once more my failure and redemption and my fear and hope and always I feel forgiveness. What do we hear in the telling of the parable of the prodigal son this time? Do we find ourselves fearful or filled with grief for the times that we have left God to pursue our own fortunes? Do we rejoice – and even laugh – at the picture of God running down the road – arms open wide – to greet us – to welcome us home? Do we find value in hearing this wonderful story over and over again? How has this story shaped us over the years? What do we hear this time? Anything new?

For this telling of the prodigal son’s story, I went back to the reason that Jesus told this parable. New meanings are revealed with every reading of the same stories we treasure and read again and again. With this reading I was reminded that earlier Jesus had been invited to the table of the leader of the Pharisees – the crème de la crème of society. And later he was surrounded by outcasts. Jesus was speaking with tax collectors and sinners who had gathered to hear him when the Pharisees and scribes in the crowd murmured – they grumbled – they muttered. They whined about Jesus eating and

drinking with sinners and tax collectors – even street people. These were the dregs of society in the first century. It was scandalous that Jesus not only received these outcasts, but that he shared table fellowship with them, and even played host to them. They and their scribes complained to the disciples: Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Why did Jesus and the disciples keep company with “those people?” The Pharisees really had a problem with God’s merciful grace. They were very versed in the Hebrew Bible. They would have heard in Jesus’s parable echoes back to the other brother stories of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-4), of Ishmael and Isaac (21:9), of Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:27-34, 27:1-26), and of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37:1-4). Sibling rivalry and the strained relationships between brothers were part of the Israelites heritage. Ironically, in all these stories it was the younger sons who were favoured when in their culture it was the elder son who was favoured.

The younger “prodigal” son stepped outside the ordinary and asked for his inheritance. Two things make this request so unusual. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, to ask for his share of his father’s estate while the father lived was unheard of, because it would have been as though to him the father were already dead. Also in Jesus’s day at the father’s death the elder son would have received twice as much as the younger. Now a father could abdicate before his death and divide his wealth, but to do so equally, giving the younger son half as his inheritance, was outside the norm. The younger received what would eventually have belonged to him and more. After he had squandered his father’s money and found himself in dire need, he even had to resort to feeding pigs – which would have been the ultimate indignity for a Jew because pigs were a symbol of pagan religions and Roman rule. But this son remembered his father’s love and goodness, and he hoped to return home and would have been happy to work as a servant for his father. But seeing his lost son from afar, the father ran to him and embraced him and kissed him. The son confessed his sins, and he was welcomed home.

To the Pharisees sinners were not just those who broke moral laws but also those who did not maintain the ritual purity practiced by the Pharisees – household laws that kept

the Pharisees separated from the rest of society. To them this prodigal son had been reckless with his father's money. He had consorted with the unwashed of society. He was a sinner who did not deserve God's mercy or love.

Does God's grace extend to the undeserving? And who are we to determine who is and is not deserving. At the end of time, I wonder if we will be happy to share the Kingdom of God with all the reformed sinners that Jesus has welcomed? Will we be able to accept that God loves "those people" as much as God loves us?

My prayer is that our stories and Jesus's parables may become one and that through our melded prodigal son story we may come to accept all people as God's people. When we come into God's Kingdom may we be pleasantly surprised to see tax collectors and sinners, street people and church people, and even other Anglicans, at the table with us.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

Laetare Jerusalem: Rejoice, O Jerusalem: and come together  
all you that love her: rejoice with joy, you that have been in  
sorrow: that you may exult, and be filled.... Let us rejoice at  
the things that were said to us: we shall go into the house of  
the Lord.