

Sunday 6 March, 2016

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Dr Stephen Ames.

Here we are half way through Lent and the readings today take us deeper into the mystery of God revealed in Christ.

We have perhaps the most loved of Jesus' parables, the story of the prodigal son who leaves his father, loses the plot completely, but returns to what he never expected. Traditionally, this parable is said to be the gospel within the gospel.

We also have the reading from St Paul about Christ who was sinless being made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God.

The parable speaks directly to us. St Paul's words grab our attention by their boldness – the sinless one made to be sin – but in heaven's name, what on earth do they mean?

In the 19th century, Christian scholars deeply imbued with the rationality of the Enlightenment were keen to point out that today's parable speaks of a reconciliation between the lost son and loving father without the need for any shedding of blood to bring it about. They thought this was the heart of the gospel.

For much longer Islamic scholars have made the same point with this addition. The parable shows, by contrast, how far Christian theology with its language of atonement through Christ's death has departed from the heart of Jesus' teachings.

They would say that today we have this contrast set before us in the reading of Jesus' parable and the passage from St Paul. What shall we make of it?

Perhaps I should say that Islam also rejects Christian belief that Jesus is the incarnate divine Son of the Father. In an earlier sermon I spoke of my encounter with a young Muslim man who with his copy of the Bible full of book marks. I had just come from an ordination and this young man confronted me in Swanston Street just before Collins Street. His point was that I misunderstood Jesus on just this point. He had no answer to the saying of Jesus in Matthew 11:25-27 where Jesus says, "nobody knows the Son except the Father and nobody knows the Father save the Son and those to whom the Son reveals him. If you believe that Jesus is the divine Son then his execution by human hands cannot be treated as of no consequence, as having no part of the narrative you want to tell about God.

Firstly we must remember the context in which Jesus told this parable.

The Pharisees and scribes were grumbling that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. The language suggests Jesus was in fact offering hospitality, he was the host. In the Middle East then and now to eat with someone is to honour them with an offer of peace and trust and solidarity, even forgiveness. Sharing your table meant sharing your life. Notice that a man of means might feed the poor as an act of kindness, but would never be said to 'eat with them'. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.

For the scribes and Pharisees Jesus makes himself unclean by eating with these people. Not only does it contradict their way of being faithful Jews, it ought to have meant that Jesus was unclean before God and to such a person God would not listen. But the problem for them was that Jesus kept performing mighty works of healing and exorcism, even raising the dead, showing that God was with him. But what kind of God is this?

Jesus' parables, especially the parable we heard today offers an answer to those who have ears to hear. And in the situation portrayed in the Gospel we see it is Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners and offering them the same reconciliation, forgiveness, welcome and celebration as the father in the parable offered his younger son. Jesus sharing a meal and the stories he told palpably confronted the scribes and Pharisees with the reality of God so different from their account of God.

This brings me directly to my second point that "Jesus told parables and Jesus was crucified." The two are connected. Jesus' parables and his other teachings and his mighty works make present the radical love of God and the radical claim of God on our lives. Jesus does this with a life giving freedom and authority that is unconstrained by the law, yet fulfilling it rather than contradicting it. The reality of God is present in Jesus life and his teaching and this turns out to be offensive to those who claim the authority and power to declare who is acceptable or not to God. This offense is what led to his death.

So it would be a profound mistake to treat Jesus' parables and Jesus' crucifixion as if they were unconnected. Even more so when we realise that Jesus could see this was coming and that was something he must go through, even though according to Luke Jesus sweated drops of blood in the garden as he wrestled with the cost of doing so.

It is the Father's love for all that Jesus brings into the world through his being in the flesh the beloved Son of the Father and through his own love for the Father as the reality in which he lives.

His suffering and death is the sharp manifestation of this love in a world offended by it, even finding him blasphemous. His suffering and death is the sharp manifestation of Jesus embodying in the world the reality the Father's love for the world. He did this in order that all might know the Father's love.

Notice that Jesus' death does not win the Father's love for the world, for God is not being reconciled to the world by Jesus' death. Rather God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself.

Like the father in the parable, the Father of Jesus does not count the world's trespasses against them. Here the imagery is of the divine court with the judge not counting the trespasses of sinful human beings against them. On what basis? Because Jesus, representing all humanity, continues in love for the Father until his last breath. His love is both utterly vulnerable and utterly invincible against all the violence humankind inflicted on him.

But here is the paradox. It is precisely this sinless Son whom St Paul says was made to be sin in order that in him we might be the righteousness of God.

How does the sinless Son come to be made sin? It does not say that Jesus committed sins like everyone else. Rather he was made to be sin, the state of being cut off from God. How could the sinless Son enter such a state? It is a difficult thought but perhaps this might help.

We only know how much we have adjusted to our lack of health when we meet a truly healthy person. We only know how far we fall short of the mark when the mark has been revealed. So only the sinless Son can know the state of being cut off from God in its full depth. Only Jesus the incarnate Son could enter that state for all and here is the paradox – Jesus could do so only in virtue of his sinless love for his Father.

It is on this basis that the Father raises his incarnate Son from the dead to vindicate their love and thereby vindicate the Son against all opposition. We gain access to the risen Son through the message of reconciliation, through baptism and the table fellowship of the body and blood of Christ. By this we become the righteousness of God. We stand freely before the Father as his beloved sons and daughters. This doesn't mean we become morally impeccable. Rather we are like the prodigal son in the parable whose father confers on him his position and relationship as his son. That son would take quite a journey, perhaps

longer than the one from the pig sty to realise what has happened to him and what it means to live in his father's love. So each day we learn.

A Prayer Book for Australia has a prayer based on the parable. It begins, "Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son." But perhaps some human beings are so far lost that they would never be met by the Son. Not so because the Son has entered the state of being cut off from God so fully that no one is unreachable. How good is that! The full prayer is as follows,

*Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us in this hope that we have grasped, so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.***