

Lent 4 2016 Havant

Joshua 5.9-12 / 2 Cor 5.16-21 / Lk 15.1-3. 11b-32

*'Twas an evening in October, I'll confess I wasn't sober,
I was rolling down the street in drunken pride
My legs were all a-flutter, I fell down in the gutter
And a pig came up and lay down by my side.
We talked about the weather
and how old friends get on together
Till a lady passing by was heard to say,
"You can tell a man that boozes by the company he chooses,"
Then the pig got up and slowly walked away.*

Today's readings are dominated by one big idea: the generosity of God.

The first reading tells about God's physical generosity to his ancient people. Having miraculously fed his people with manna, that mysterious food from heaven, during their desert wanderings, God was now preparing to feed them from the regular bounty of the land.

St Paul stresses the spiritual generosity of God as he makes people new in Christ; God has reconciled the world to himself and no longer holds our sins against us.

God's generosity in feeding and reconciliation are brought together in the third reading, that wonderful story of the prodigal son.

It is a great pity that all we heard were selections from that great 15th chapter St Luke's Gospel, because you can't really understand this parable without the rest of the chapter. If you want a catchy title for the whole chapter it could be "lost and found" because it contains three parables all making the same point: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son – or you could call them the rejoicing shepherd, the rejoicing housewife and the rejoicing father.

The chapter starts with Jesus was being criticised for his disreputable table companions, tax collectors and sinners. Hence my text. It's all a question of what's called guilt by association.

Rather typically, Jesus doesn't tell his critics off directly, in fact he doesn't even refer to what they said. Instead he tells them some stories all of which illustrate God's delight when the lost is found.

The story of the prodigal son is the culmination of the whole chapter, it's the longest of the three stories and is the one to which the other two are building up. Jesus starts with a shepherd who has lost one of his sheep and who leaves all the others behind as he searches high and low for the stray. Just before we jump to the conclusion that he had left the others in the safety of a sheepfold, Jesus

hastens to tell us that in fact he left them in the wilderness, where they might have been prey to all sorts of dangers. I think this is quite deliberate, because it emphasises the sheer extravagance of God's love for the lost. We do not know why the sheep wandered off and what particular difficulties it had got into. Nor do we know whether the sheep left behind came to any harm. All we know is the sheer delight the shepherd feels when he has found and taken home the one who was lost.

The second story concerns a woman who has lost a coin and hunts everywhere in the house for it, having a good spring clean in the process, until she finds it. Unlike the sheep which presumably had some say about whether to wander off or not, the coin must simply have rolled accidentally into a corner. But once again, how she lost it or where it had got to is not the point of the story. Rather Jesus wants to emphasise her joy in finding it again.

Now both of these stories are important as preparation for today's gospel. And notice something about the way the drama builds up. The shepherd had a hundred sheep and lost one. The woman had 10 coins and lost one. So you how much bigger her proportionate loss. By the time we get to the third story, the man had only two sons: 100:1 to 10:1 to 2:1. It is all designed to make us feel the intensity of the father's loss and to be ready for the great party at the end when the son comes home. There is however something different about this parable, because the father doesn't go out in search of his lost son. Instead the story seems to be more about the wayward son than about his grieving father. Here again we see how Luke presents Jesus as so cleverly building the story up. The sheep got lost through its own stupidity, the coin through sheer accident, but the son was lost through his own deliberate fault. Indeed, to mix the metaphors, having dug himself a hole, he just couldn't stop digging.

You see what Jesus was doing: he started by lulling his critics into a sense of false security. They would have listened to the first two stories and happily shared in the rejoicing of the shepherd and the housewife. But then, the mood changes. The third story, the one we heard in the gospel this morning is about someone much more like the tax-collectors and sinners they had criticised Jesus for dining with. But they may not have realised that to start with.

Probably by the time Jesus got round to this one, they had forgotten how the incident had started; so they may well have just carried on listening to a master storyteller. And we have to admit, Jesus does lay it on a bit thick about the misdoings of the errant son. It may even have been that by this point some of Jesus' hearers were beginning to lick their lips as they prepared for the sticky end the young man was bound to come to.

But somehow or other, having sunk to the very depths, the wanderer found his way home. It's worth remembering that he had a change of heart when he found himself on his uppers. His

repentance was motivated in the first instance by need. He simply realised he'd be better off at home. Genuine repentance and contrition probably came later. Nonetheless his father was looking out for him, rushed out to meet him and killed the fatted calf. A joy even greater than that of the shepherd and the housewife - not to mention the prodigal's own joy at being welcomed home. That's the point at which genuine repentance and contrition kicked in.

That's a bit odd, Jesus' hearers probably thought, but they were still gripped by the story. But then Jesus springs the trap - the other son is brought into the picture. He is mightily put out by his father's unrestrained joy. He, the virtuous, stay-at-home, obedient, hardworking son upstaged by a returning wastrel.

There can be no doubt about the point of these three parables: there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Jesus' self-righteous critics have no hiding place. Jesus had very cleverly led them to a place where they know that they are the grudging older son, while the sinners eating with Jesus were the returning prodigal welcomed home by God with such an extravagant party.

A large part of the purpose of Lent is learning how to move from resting on our own supposed laurels (which probably don't actually add up to very much anyway!) in order to return home. Don't worry if your motives for repentance seem rather shaky and half-hearted to start with. The best kind of contrition comes when we know we are forgiven and restored, because it's only then we realise what we have lost.

That is bound to be good for us, but best of all it will make heaven rejoice.