

WORSHIP AT HOME – 14TH MARCH 2021 – LENT FOUR – MOTHERING SUNDAY

Dear Friends,

This week we revisit a very well known and loved parable – that of the Prodigal Son. A parable showing us the love of God which is all-encompassing and surrounds us at all times. May we all feel his love, compassion, strength and support as we journey through life. As we look now at our lives beginning to return to something nearer normality may we rejoice in all that he has given us – and turn to him in good times and bad. God bless. *Margaret*

Call to worship: Loving God, always there for us. We are here to worship and praise you.
Loving God, always calling us, we listen for your voice.
Loving God, always ready to forgive, we come to your forgiving love.
Loving God, always ready to receive us, we come to you,
ready to be sent out again to share your love with others.
Loving God, always there for us, we now long to worship and praise you. **Amen**

The words to ‘Give me joy in my heart’ written anonymously, adapted by A. Servison and others. StF 76

1 Give me joy in my heart, keep me praising; give me joy in my heart, I pray.

Give me joy in my heart, keep me loving – keep me loving till the break of day:

Sing Hosanna! Sing Hosanna! Sing hosanna to the King of kings!

Sing hosanna! Sing hosanna! Sing hosanna to the king!

2 Give me peace in my heart, keep me loving; give me peace in my heart, I pray.

Give me peace in my heart, keep me loving. Keep me loving till the break of day:

Sing hosanna!.....

3 Give me love in my heart, keep me serving; give me love in my heart, I pray;

Give me love in my heart, keep me serving; keep me serving till the break of day:

Sing hosanna!.....

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, you entered our world, taking on our humanity and identifying yourself totally with us. You came to lead us out of darkness into your marvellous light and to set us free from everything that separates us from one another and from you – to bring us life in all its fullness. You came as the Word made flesh – as King of kings and Lord of lords – as the Prince of peace – as the Son of God.

And yet you came taking the form of a servant, humbling yourself even to death on a cross, offering your life for so many and taking the way of costly sacrifice. You could have served yourself and looked to your own glory, but you resisted temptation, your thoughts only for us.

You give us the privilege of sharing in the work of your kingdom, offering our service in turn, giving of ourselves without reserve and putting our own interests second to the needs of those around us.

Lord Jesus Christ, teach us to show our gratitude in all we do, in all we say, in all we think and in all we are.

For your astonishing love, we thank you. **Amen**

And yet, loving God, we know that we do fail you and we seek your pardon for those times.

Forgive us, that like your people across the ages, we are all too human – our spirits willing but our flesh weak – our intentions good but our living up to them poor – our commitment real but our discipleship not always living up to that. Through your grace, have mercy.

We are sorry that, although you speak to us day by day – though you challenge us through your word – even though your voice is there ready for all to hear it – so often we have been slow to listen. We do not listen to your guidance.

You never let us down, Lord, but have always been constant in your care, we cannot say the same for ourselves. We are sorry.

Loving God, help us to recognise our faults, and, with your help, to turn from them, so that we may be the people you would have us be. Through your grace and mercy, pardon us and lead us ever onward to your glory.

In the name of Christ, **Amen.**

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21 [The Living Bible paraphrased:

Stop evaluating Christians by what the world thinks about them or by what they seem to be like on the outside. Once I mistakenly thought of Christ that way, merely as a human being like myself. How differently I feel now! When someone becomes a Christian he becomes a brand-new person inside. He is not the same anymore. A new life has begun!

All these new things are from God who brought us back to himself through what Christ Jesus did. And God has given us the privilege of urging everyone to come into his favour and be reconciled to him. For God was in Christ, restoring the world to himself, no longer counting men's sins against them but blotting them out. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others. We are Christ's ambassadors. God is using us to speak to you: we beg you as though Christ himself were here pleading with you. Receive the love he offers you – be reconciled to God. For God took the sinless Christ and poured into him our sins. Then, in exchange, he poured God's goodness into us.

Comment: The New Testament introduces two decisive shifts in understanding God's forgiveness. Firstly – it is true for all people in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and secondly – that those who have received God's forgiveness are to continue his work of reconciliation on a grand scale. And that means us!

Sometimes the death of Jesus is discussed as though it entailed an impersonal transaction or exchange – but the language of God 'reconciling the world to himself through Christ' and Christ being 'made sin' for us suggests the opposite. In the human Jesus, God came into our very midst – into all that alienated the human race from him – and he personally delivered us from it, submitting himself to the worst that human hostility and selfishness could do. He refused to play 'tit for tat' and so drew the painful sting from the relationship between humanity and its Creator. So, Paul tells us, we too should see others from God's perspective, as part of his new creation – as someone he has reconciled to himself. We are also caught up with God's plan, working together with him so that others will respond to his reconciling act.

Luke 15: 11-32 – an alternative translation written by H. J. Richards [Plain English Bible]:

He introduces the passage: *'An Arab bishop has assured me that no Palestinian father would ever demean himself to the extent that this father does. But God is even more prodigal than his spendthrift children, and forgives them unconditionally in a most irrational way, despite their worst excesses. And if the resentment of the elder brother finds an echo in our own hearts, we are even more lost and distant from God than the younger son had been. Luther said that if we had nothing of the New Testament except this parable, we would have the complete Gospel.'*

A farmer had two sons.

One day the younger one said, 'Dad, if only you'd die, so that I could have my share of the estate!'

Instead of exploding with anger at such impertinence,

The farmer generously sold part of the farm, and gave him his share.

That done, the boy packed his things and went abroad. There he had a wild time, spending his money like water.

At last his pockets were empty.

Then the harvest failed right across the country, and he was left with no money and no food.

So he took a job with a local farmer who put him in charge of feeding the pigs [imagine!].

He could have joined the pigs at their trough, he was so hungry, but no-one lifted a hand to help him.

Finally he came to his senses.

'Back at home,' he said to himself, there's not a farmhand who hasn't got more than he can eat. And here's me, starving to death. I'm going back'

And he turned over in his head the sort of apology he ought to make.

'Dad,' he would say, 'I've wronged God and I've wronged you. I don't deserve to be called a son of yours anymore. Will you take me on as a farmhand?'

So he set off home.

While he was still some way off, he could see his father on the road, looking for his return.

Full of pity, his father did the unthinkable.

He went running down the road to meet the boy and threw his arms round his neck and hugged him.

His son began to say his piece: 'Dad,' he said, 'I've wronged God and I've wronged you. I don't deserve to be called a son of yours any more.....'

But the father cut him short.

'Quick,' he called out to the servants, 'God and get the best clothes out; put the family ring on his finger, and find some shoes for his bare feet. And kill that calf we've been fattening! Tonight we'll have a barbecue for the whole village.

My boy was lost and he's been found.

He was dead and he's come back to life.'

So the celebrations started.

During all this, the elder son had been working on the farm. As he was on his way home, he'd almost reached the farmhouse when he heard bagpipes and dancing.

'What's going on?' he asked a farmhand. 'Your brother's back,' the man said. 'And your dad is roasting the calf we've been fattening because he's safe and sound.'

The elder brother was furious, and wouldn't even go inside the house.

So again the father came running out and begged him to come in and join the party.

'Never!', the son replied 'I've slaved for you all these years, and always done everything you told me to do. And what payment do I get? Not a sausage! No parties with *my* friends!

But this son of yours can throw all your money away on girls! Then he comes home, and you go and kill the fatted calf for him!'

'Son,' said the father, 'you've always been close to me, as I have to you. All the farm is yours – you know that.

But we *had* to have a party tonight.

It's your *brother* who was lost and has been found.

It's your *brother* who was dead and has come back to life.'

God is like that.

Comment [based on a piece by Nick Fawcett [Common Worship; Miscellany]: If there is one thing that most of us find hard, it is saying sorry after we've made a mistake. To do that means swallowing our pride, overcoming our embarrassment and laying ourselves open to a possible rebuff. It is far easier, though far from satisfactory, to keep our head down and wait for the hurt to subside. But if 'Sorry' can be the hardest word to *say*, there are three words – directly related – which can be even more difficult to *mean*. The

words: 'I forgive you.' We may be happy enough to say that – we may want to mean it and genuinely believe that we do – but to really forgive someone in the true sense of the word is a rare gift indeed. All too often a past mistake is dredged up again in the heat of anger. An error which we considered long-forgotten suddenly thrown back in our face. And we are all probably just as guilty of doing that as of having it done to us.

With God, it is different. When we confess our sins and say we are truly sorry, they are put behind us – they are over and done with, dealt with once and for all. No going back to them later; it is as if they never were. That is the good news.

The more difficult news is that God wants us to show that same level of forgiveness to others. It is a lot to ask and we will probably finally fail, but if we are serious about discipleship, we need to try.

If God can forgive us, who are we not to forgive in turn?

The words to 'I will sing the wondrous story' written by Francis Harold Rowley [1854-1952] StF 323

1 I will sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me,

How he left the realms of glory for the cross on Calvary:

Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me,

Sing it with his saints in glory, gathered by the crystal sea.

2 I was lost; but Jesus found me, found the sheep that went astray,

Raised me up, and gently led me back into the narrow way:

Yes, I'll sing.....

3 Faint was I, and fears possessed me, bruised was I from many a fall;

Hope was gone, and shame distressed me; but his love has pardoned all:

Yes, I'll sing.....

4 days of darkness still come o'er me; sorrow's paths I often tread;

But the Saviour still is with me, by his hand I'm safely led:

Yes, I'll sing.....

5 He will keep me till the river rolls its waters at me feet;

Then he'll bear me safely over, where the loved ones I shall meet.

Yes, I'll sing.....

Prayer: Merciful God, we pray for those who walk through life with a sense of guilt, burdened by past mistakes or overwhelmed by a sense of failure; maybe troubled by feelings of shame or depressed by the knowledge of their own weakness. Help them to understand that in you they can find true forgiveness and a new beginning. **Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who commit evil with no sense of wrong-doing, no concept of sin – with no remorse or sign of scruples. Help them to glimpse what is right and good and to be touched by the renewing, transforming grace of God. **Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who have been wronged by others – hurt, deceived, betrayed, let down. Help them to be ready to forgive others as you have forgiven them. **Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer.**

We pray for those whose relationships are being tested – with family and friends – with those in their places of work or in their homes – with other Christians, even in their own fellowship. Help them to understand the cause of division between them and to work towards the healing of all such rifts – towards forgiving and seeking forgiveness. **Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who are finding life hard at the moment, Lord, facing crises and disasters. May they find in you compassion and a resting place, and strength to carry on. **Lord in your mercy hear our prayer. Amen**

Lord, it's often difficult to know who's right and who's wrong. Just as it takes two to argue, so it takes two to build the bridge which will join two islands that have been separated by an ocean of misunderstanding.

Please help us to learn how to build bridges, no matter how far or how wide the gap. Help us to be willing to realise the loneliness of anger, of hurt and of damaged pride, so that we can be a continent of hope and not a cluster of islands in a raging sea. Give us a generous heart and a gracious spirit; the ability not just to speak of forgiveness but to display the truth of it in our lives. Teach us to give those who have wronged us the opportunity to begin afresh with the past forgotten and the slate wiped clean. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.** [from prayers written by Pete Townsend and Nick Fawcett]

The story-line of the passage today is one any soap opera could use. Under Jewish law the eldest son was entitled to two-thirds of his father's property while one third would go to the younger. Sometimes the father would give his sons their inheritance early if he wanted to retire from running his affairs and take it easy. But, in this instance, the younger son actually isn't prepared to wait until his father's death – he wants his share now, and makes that quite clear! What could have made the younger son feel as strongly as that? Perhaps he felt he wasn't given enough respect or responsibility. He might even have been jealous of his elder brother who was going to get twice as much of the inheritance. There are many reasons why families argue, fall out – and often say things which later they regret.

The boy let all the money trickle through his fingers and was left hoping that the pigs would leave him a few crumbs. He soon realised that he had lost more than he had ever gained by turning his back on his father and decided to go home and ask to become a farm hand. As soon as his father saw him coming he ran out to the boy – not a normal action in Jewish society of the day]. Once back home, that young man was treated far more generously than he ever hoped – he was given a robe, denoting honour and respect and a ring signifying authority. He was given shoes, a symbol of freedom – and a feast! Father and son were reconciled – the son not only accepted but given far more than ever before.

In contrast the elder brother lost the plot completely – so annoyed at his father's actions that he refused to be reconciled to his brother. Indeed, everyone *had* been affected in some way by the boy's actions, but the father had welcomed him back with open arms. Perhaps if the father [God] decides to throw a party we should all take part in the celebration and not question his judgement. In other words – if God forgives, who are we to argue!

The words to 'The King of love my shepherd is' written by Henry Williams Baker [1821-1877] StF 479

1 The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness fails me never;

I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine for ever.

2 Where streams of living water flow my ransomed soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow with food celestial feedeth.

3 Perverse and foolish oft I strayed, but yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulder gently laid, and home rejoicing brought me.

4 In death's dark vale I fear no ill with thee, dear Lord, beside me;
Thy rod and staff my comfort still, thy cross before to guide me.

5 Thou spread'st a table in my sight, thy unction grace bestoweth;
And O what transport of delight from thy pure chalice floweth!

6 And so through all the length of days thy goodness faileth never:
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house for ever.

Closing Prayer Gracious God, the prodigal son came to that point in his life where he had to make a difficult decision. So, loving God, we pray that when we too have to face a time of decision – a time of being at a crossroads – a fork in the road of life – may we know your guiding hand in the decisions we make. May we find your love & strength as we encounter friends along that path, whether old ones or new. May we know your arms enfolding us and that we may go forward, confident that all life finds its true path with you and in your presence. **Amen**

