

Fourth Sunday of lent: March 14th 2010

Joshua 5:2-12; Luke 15:1-32

Notes: Joshua 5:2-12

- The book of Joshua is seen by scholars as continuing on the themes of the first five books of the Bible and forms the last book of what is referred to as the Hexateuch (six books). The book grew out of the events of the seventh century and more than likely took its present shape in the light of the events of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the subsequent exile to Babylon.
- The major theme of the Book of Joshua is the promise given by God: *As I was with Moses, I will be with you (1:5; 3:7; 4:14)*. There are many parallels between the ministry and actions of Joshua and those of Moses.
- Joshua, though, unlike Moses is presented as being the ideal leader and seems to have few flaws. He is what all leaders should be like and his chief quality is that he keeps all of the laws of Moses. In the light of the circumstances of its writing, this is a key reminder to the people.

Today's unusual story is one part of three interconnected stories which were more than likely were independent stories that have been put together in this particular setting because of the importance of the approaching attack on Jericho. We have the story of the circumcision, the keeping of the Passover and then the account of God appearing to Joshua in a scene that is very similar to God speaking to Moses in the burning bush at the beginning of the Exodus. These are all stories that set out the clear theological message that will go with them throughout the conquest of Canaan.

What is being set before the people is the challenge of faithfulness. They have a promise given to them by God: they will be given the land of Canaan. This has been set out as a part of the covenant he made with them at Sinai. But that gift of the land comes at a price. They are called to be a people living under obedience, a people who lives out their daily lives according to the laws that were given by God to Moses in the wilderness. They could not live their own way. They could no longer determine their own destinies. They were to be God's people and as the People of God they were to live as he wanted.

This is made clear when the story talks about the death of the original pilgrims in the wilderness. They rebelled against God and against Moses the one anointed by God. And they all died in the desert without seeing the land promised to them. This new people who have been led by God into Canaan must live differently – or they will suffer the same fate.

When we remember that the final editing of this book took place during the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of the City of Jerusalem with its temple, the message could not have been clearer: faithfulness to God and God alone is what brings blessings and peace. Division, unhappiness and ultimately destruction comes about when the self and self interest takes over from the will of God. And the people could see it happening all over again, in their time. In this way it represents a call to repentance, to returning to the will of God and to an abandonment of the ways of the world around them.

Notes: Luke 15:1-32

- The theme of this chapter is set out in the opening two verses: *All the tax-agents and the sinners were coming to hear him. But the Pharisees and the scribes complained.* This is a key part of the message of Luke: sinners and the marginalized listen to Jesus while the priest and the leaders of the people reject him.
- The Pharisees in Luke grumble, observe Jesus suspiciously, form deep grudges against him, complain and eventually put him to death.
- This is the contrast in the Gospel: the self serving think that they do not need Jesus, do not need a Messiah while the sinners know they are in need, that they are in sinners in need of the Doctor.
- Repentance and conversion are other key themes in Luke and they link into what he presents as being the mission of Jesus: *I did not come to call righteous people, but sinners to repentance.*
- These parables need to be read in the light of 7:29-30: *All the people and the tax agents had heard and justified God by being baptized with John's baptism. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's plan for them by not being baptized by him.*

The real problem for the Pharisees, the Priests and the Lawyers was that the sinners were coming to Jesus and were bypassing them. They were slowly becoming a people, a congregation gathering around the Messiah and that worried the leaders. They were in danger of losing their positions of privilege and power. In the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, the rich and the powerful were in the same boat as the poor, the sinners and the marginalized. The Kingdom of Jesus was a very different Kingdom to the one in which they held power.

These three parables are presented by Luke as the response of Jesus to these complaints of the Pharisees. He is seen as the one sent by God to those who are lost among the People of God and his response and ways stand in contrast to those of the supposed leaders of the People of God. The Pharisees should be rejoicing to see so many people finding their way into God's family again but instead they complain because they have been sidelined. It is clear in the way that Luke presents them, that they are more concerned about themselves than their original vocations and it is this selfishness that will destroy them. As the people of the Exodus died in the wilderness, so will they die in their stubborn sinfulness.

In the story of the Son who was lost, the key figure is the Father. He is the one who is the most hurt but he is also the one who risks so much more in giving forgiveness. He is generous and even handed in his dealings with the sons and he shows great love and concern to both of them.

He knows with the first son, when he allows him to take his inheritance and run away that he might well be losing both son and money. Yet he takes that risk, seeing in the younger son a lot more than just his selfishness and greed. It is what he sees in him – even at the moment when his young son was hurting him the most – that allows him to take this risk. He knows that his boy is greater than his sins, greater and more loving than can be seen in the way he is acting. The Father sees into the very heart and being of the son and believes in him.

The same goes for the elder son. Even though that son is equally hurtful and sinful, he does not cast him out of the land and punish him for his rejection. He allows the boy to continue to live on the farm and to inherit all that was due to him. He is a forgiving father who loves his sons at all times, in the face of all that they do and even at the very moment when they are sinning so arrogantly against him. That is why he is the loving father.

We can all relate – or should be able to relate – to that younger son. He is heedless and has his heart set on one thing and one thing only – what he considers to be his by right. He takes it and runs, failing to consider what his actions might mean to his father and to his brother and is completely blind to what he might also be doing to others who are aware of what is going on. He is the only one that is important in his decision and it is this selfishness, arrogance and pride that will bring about his fall.

His fall is magnificently shown by Luke in having him to hire himself as a herder of pigs. How far has he removed himself from the loving family from which he began. And, as Jesus makes clear, it is all his own fault.

When the son returns home, the focus of the gospel shifts to the Father. He does not rebuke the son, does not give him the *I told you so* sermon and force him to squirm and suffer. He is generous in his love. He runs out to meet him and to welcome him home. He embraces him, kisses him, dresses him in fine clothing and puts on a party for his benefit, all actions that are so much over the top. But it makes the point: a returning son is of special importance to the Father.

As Jesus makes clear, this is how the Father is to us who are sinners when we, like the son in this story are willing to acknowledge that we are sinners, repent and return to live in the ways that God has set out for us. God comes out to us offering this healing and forgiveness.

The eldest son is the truly sad point in this story. He too has hurt his father but in different ways. He has hidden his sins behind a veneer of obedience. His faithfulness has been a sham, a show and now when the pressure is on he shows the full extent of his love. He rejects the Father and shows his selfishness.

That explodes in anger, shows his rage against the father and rejects every move the Father makes to comfort him and to heal their divisions. He sulks and seems to want to sit down on his own, wallowing in self pity and sin. He complains about having spent all of his life slaving for his father and yet he had never been given an adequate reward. That about says it all. His love of the father has always been conditional, conditional on him being given what he thought was his entitlement. While the father shows unconditional love, the eldest son comes across as being nothing more than selfish.

What is sad about the sinful son is that all the time he was living in his father's house, he was unaware of the privilege that had been given to him. He was blind to everything but himself. Everything about his life was measured in terms of how it impacted on him rather than appreciating that all he had was his father's. He did not earn it. He did not create it himself and it was not his – except inasmuch as his father gave it to him. Despite all of this, the Father continues to love him. That is what is truly amazing and the real point of the story. When faced with rejection, hurt and the evil things that were said about him and to him, the Father continued to love the son. Perhaps even loved him more and more.

Conclusion:

In these three parables Jesus makes lots of things clear to us this Lent. The Gospel is about love and forgiveness. God loves us and offers us forgiveness. That forgiveness comes to us in and through Jesus Christ his only Son who died on the cross so that the forgiveness could be real. The problem is that the expectation of that same loving and forgiving God is that we behave in the way he behaves. He expects, no more than that, he demands that we love and forgive others as he loves and forgives us. If we are not prepared to do that then we cannot claim to be his children. There are lots of human reasons why we might not be prepared to love someone or forgive them but none of them wash with God.

For the Hebrew people in the time of Joshua the situation was made abundantly clear. They were to live in the land of Canaan in the way God wanted them to live. If they did that they would be living in a land overflowing with milk and honey. If, however, they lived in the land according to their own desires, following their own ways then they would live in a land filled with sorrow, darkness and pain. And that is what happened.

For the Church of our time the message is also abundantly clear. God demands that we are a community of faith which goes out into the highways and byways befriending the poor and the marginalized, which embraces the sinners and the tax collectors and celebrates the joys of the Kingdom with them. A Church that remains faithful to that vocation will be a Church that grows, that will be filled with peace, joy and happiness and will be a community in which God will make his home.

That is where we stand at this point in Lent. Are we sinners who can hear God calling us back to himself? Are we pilgrims on the journey who can see our heavenly Father rushing out to meet us and to celebrate our return to him? Or we like the elder brother, sitting darkly on the fringes of the family of God, sulking and disappointed that God has not given us all that we think we so richly deserve? The path of repentance will lead to life. The other, the path of the closed self will lead to destruction. We do not have a lot of time left between now and Easter. The choice is ours. The invitations are out and God awaits our response.