

Sermon

Sunday 14th March, 2010

Lessons

Joshua 5: 8 – 12

2 Corinthians 5: 16 - 21

St Luke 15: 1 – 3, 11 – 32

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O God, who sent Your Word to speak in the prophets and to live in Your Son; prepare us to receive Your Word written in the Holy Scriptures, incarnate in Christ, and spoken by Your Spirit within us; that in its truth we may have life and salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There is so much for us to notice in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The name itself is open to dispute. The parable is popularly recognised as that of the prodigal son, but the story does not reach its climax with the son who is lost. Most of the parables do not reach their point until the very end. At the end of this parable, it is the older son and not the younger who is at the centre of the story. It is the older son who with indignation and righteousness is enraged, not so much with the return of his younger brother per se but by the fact that their father has welcomed him so warmly and laid on a sumptuous, extravagant feast for him. The older son protests that his younger brother is the very son who wanted their father dead. To have asked for his inheritance, as he did, is to wish his father's death. The older son does not hold back with his father: he wasted your livelihood on harlots and you have killed the fatted calf for him! Nevertheless, the father said, 'Your brother was dead, and is alive again, and

was lost and is found.’ The emotions at play in this family dispute are there for all to see. The older son will not be persuaded.

Besides being referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son or understood as the Parable of the Older Brother, it may also be thought of as the Parable of the Forgiving Father. The father will carry the deep and painful memory of his son asking for his inheritance. He will remember that conversation as if it were yesterday. His young son, whom he had loved from birth, wished him dead. To his face, his son said, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ It is a painful, painful experience to have love rejected and the father has carried that poisonous memory for too long. Nevertheless, he saw his son returning from a great way off. The implication is that the father looked to the horizon for his son not just on that day but on every day since his son had left. In hope, and love, he wanted more than anything for his son to return.

What is more, the custom would have been for the returning son to march all the way to the father’s door and, once there, to fall at his father’s feet and beg forgiveness. In the story, as Jesus tells it, the father runs out to greet his son and before his son can fall on his knees at his father’s feet, his father embraces him. He does not let his son fall to the ground. In the end, I tend to think of it as the Parable of the Forgiving Father. In the end, the father is loving and

forgiving to both of his sons, the one who spent his livelihood on harlots and the one who was morally self-righteous.

One verse that I particularly like is that of the younger son who, while still in that far country, came to himself. Jesus said:

Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But, when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

The younger son spent his father's livelihood on harlots and ends up craving for the pods intended for the swine. The swine, the pigs, were for the Jews the most unclean animal and this younger son worked with them and craved the very food which they ate. Does he return for selfish reasons or is there within him a residual sense of his father's love for him? That is one of the joys of the story: it leaves us wondering about the sincerity of the son upon his return.

Dead Man Walking is one of the most powerful films that I have ever seen and the book is excellent as well. Set in the United States, it is the true story of a nun, Sister Helen Prejean, who is asked to write to a prisoner on Death Row. The prisoner, Elmo Patrick Sonnier, brutally killed two teenagers. In 1982, Sister Helen was working in a housing project in New Orleans caring for 'poor black residents.' Of her work in New Orleans, she said, 'Death is rampant here

– from guns, disease, addiction. Medical care scarcely exists.’ She agreed to write to Patrick Sonnier but was warned that he doesn’t write. Sonnier and his brother killed a teenage couple on a lovers’ lane. Sister Helen asked herself if she really wanted to know this man, what would she say to him and what would he have to say to her. She said that as she sealed the very first envelope to be sent to him she wondered what his two young victims were like and she thought of their parents.

Within a week, Patrick wrote back to her. The man who never writes wrote back to her. He explained that he had tried ‘going it alone’ but that it was ‘just too hard’ and her letters would be very welcome. At the time of the murders, the local newspaper, the *Iberian*, said in its editorial:

It’s hard to imagine that there may be somebody in this fine community of ours who could contemplate, much less carry out, this vilest of vile deeds.

Sister Helen said that as she and Patrick became steady correspondents she began to see Patrick and think of him as a fellow human being. Helen was entitled to see the documents which the prison held on him. She was told that she could take them home with her if she wanted. She sat in the prison reading the papers. After some time, she decided that she had read enough and could not take them home. Sister Helen said:

I leave the documents on the table and walk across the dying sunlight

to the door and close it behind me, the words of Jeremiah welling within me:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
sobbing and lamenting:
Rachel weeping for her children,
refusing to be comforted
because they were no more.

Some months later, she wonders if by befriending a killer she is betraying his victims. She has never lost a friend or loved one through murder. She has never experienced the rage, the loss, the grief, the helplessness and the sickening pain day after day, month after month and year after year. But, she says,

Jesus Christ, whose way of life I try to follow, refused to meet hate with hate and violence with violence. I pray for the strength to be like him. I cannot believe in a God who metes out hurt for hurt, pain for pain, torture for torture.

Sister Helen persuades Patrick to allow her to be present when he is executed.

At first, he resists telling her how terrible it will be, but she insists. She said to him, 'I can't bear the thought that you would die without seeing one loving face. I will be the face of Christ for you. Just look at me.'

Although he received a stay of execution, in the hours before that first date with death, Sister Helen asked him if he believed God had forgiven him. Patrick said, 'At first, no. I felt that even God hated me, but I know now that God forgives me.' She tells him that she has read the papers which the prison holds

on him. She says, ‘Those poor children. Those poor parents. They must be in hell.’ Pat replies:

I will go to my grave feeling bad about those kids. Every night when they dim the lights on the tier I kneel by my bunk and pray for those kids and their parents. Nobody was supposed to get killed. Although she did not know it at the time, Pat had tried to commit suicide after his arrest. Sister Helen listened to his remorse. She said, ‘I just looked at him. I’m not sure how to measure his sincerity.’ The prison chaplain had told her that the men on Death Row are scum and that they will try to con her.

In the week before he died, Patrick received the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, Mass. Each prisoner remains in their cell while the priest celebrates the Sacrament in the corridor. Sister Helen had helped arrange the service. The audio-taped hymn is played. His head against the bars, Pat listens to every word:

If you cross the barren desert
you shall not die of thirst.....
be not afraid, I go before you always.....
if you stand before the fires of hell
and death is at your side.....
be not afraid.

Sister Helen sat in the corridor with the priest and looked into Pat’s cell. She said:

I picture the words of the song echoing from room to room within the death house, the words filling the place where the witnesses will sit, where the executioner will stand, the tender, merciful God – words,

travelling across the hundred feet of tiled floor that must be walked to where the electric chair waits. I picture the words bouncing off the oak wood of the chair and wrapping themselves round it: be not afraid. I know the words may not stop the death that is about to take place, but the words can breathe courage and dignity into the one who must walk to this oak chair and sit in it.

The old priest says the prayers....and takes the communion wafer from the container and places it on Pat's tongue, then another into my outstretched hand.

'The Body of Christ,' he says. 'Amen.'

She said:

Yes, in this place I believe that you are here, oh Christ, you, who sweat blood and who prayed 'aloud and in silent tears' for your Father to remove your own 'cup' of suffering. This man about to die is not innocent, but he is human, and that is enough to draw you here.

After his execution, Sister Helen opened Pat's Bible. He had highlighted

Psalm 31. The psalmist wrote:

I am contemptible,
loathsome to my neighbours,
to my friends a thing of fear.....
I am forgotten, as good as dead in their hearts,
something discarded.
.....As they combine against me,
plotting to take my life.
But I put my trust in You, [O Lord]....

Elmo Patrick Sonnier knew who he was. He came to himself and in his final days he heard Jesus say, 'This is my Body, which is broken for you.' Patrick felt the embrace of the Father's arms. Innocent Patrick was not, but this is not a Table for the innocent.

Let me close with the rather amusing story told by the desert fathers of a very self-satisfied monk called Theopemptus who came to see the great spiritual master Macarius. The story goes that “when he was alone with him, Macarius asked, ‘How are things going with you?’ Theopemptus replied, ‘Thanks to your prayers, all is well.’ The old man asked, ‘Do you still have to battle with your sexual fantasies?’ He answered, ‘No, up to now all is well.’ He was afraid to admit anything. But the old man said to him, ‘I have lived for many years as an ascetic and everyone sings my praises, but despite my age, I still have trouble with sexual fantasies.’ Theopemptus said, ‘Well, it is the same with me, to tell the truth.’ And the old man went on to admit, one by one, all the other [distractions] that caused him to struggle [spiritually], until he had brought Theopemptus to admit all of them himself.”¹

Finally, Theopemptus came to himself. This is not a Table for the innocent. It is for those who have made mistakes, the consequences of which cannot be undone; those who struggle and fail to be morally better people; those whose sense of self-worth is so low as to bring to the surface decisions and lifestyles that will damage and never satisfy; those who know they have never been the parents their children needed them to be; and those who feel that they have squandered life.

¹ Williams *Silence and Honey Cakes* p27

Patrick Sonnier once told Sister Helen that his younger brother had always been the favourite and that he had never truly felt his mother's love. He said that he had never really known the love of women. And, said Pat, it was a shame that a man had had to come to prison, to Death Row, to feel love: the love of Sister Helen and the love of God. This is the Table of those who have come to themselves. That is what the season of Lent is all about. This is the Table of the Forgiving Father.

Amen.