

Not servants, but sons and daughters: our identity in Christ

Lent 4 March 14th, 2010

Joshua 5:2-12, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:11-32

Among our readings for this Sunday morning is the well-known story of the Prodigal Son. Those who are close enough to see the small display at the front – a robe, a ring, a pair of sandals and a poster of the famous Rembrandt painting on the subject will have guessed that I want to spend some time on this rich, inexhaustible parable of the Father's kindness, mercy and love.

All the readings set for today speak to us, in a profound way, of the issues of forgiveness, reconciliation, welcome, belonging, and of our true identity as God's children. They all underline God's embracing love and care for all who turn to him.

The reading from Joshua concerns the circumcision that was for the Israelites the mark of belonging to God and to the community. It gave them their identity. The final portion of the reading describes how God's provision of manna through the wilderness ceased as the Israelites entered the promised land, and how this was replaced by the produce of the land, also a gift of God.

Psalm 32 contains a theme of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation. The psalmist recognises that the honest acknowledgment of his transgressions before God leads to freedom, liberation, and a sense of joy.

St Paul, writing to the Corinthian church makes the startling claim that *if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* Turning to Christ and living in Christ provides us with a new identity – we are a new creation.

In the gospel narrative of the father and the two sons we have a story which resonates with our own lives. The younger son is very much like we ourselves may have been when young: impatient, insensitive, independent. Keen to strike out on his own, and supremely confident that he would succeed in whatever he attempted, he is eager to break away from the strong family ties that seem so restrictive and binding.

The Father in his love and wisdom grants his rather hurtful request. Like all parents in such a situation would do, the Father experiences grief, and no doubt anxiety on his child's account, but he also realises that he must let go. He gives his son the portion of the inheritance due and the gift of freedom, though he may have secretly wondered how it would all turn out.

Of course, it turns out badly. Inexperienced, improvident and self-centred, the younger son quickly runs through his resources. Family and kin may have seemed repressive and limiting at times, but at least they did provide a safety net not available to him in "a far country". The younger son ends up lost, socially despised, morally and ritually unclean. He loses any sense of self-esteem, and comes to the brink of disaster.

Sometimes it takes sinking to the lowest point in our lives before we "come to ourselves". The younger son decides to go back and offer himself as the lowest form of hired servant to his Father. He is confident in his father's fairness as an employer. He is, as yet, unaware of the extent of his father's love. Practising a well-rehearsed speech – which he never gets to deliver in full, he sets off home.

But the father doesn't want a servant – he wants a son! He meets his child and calls for a robe (a sign of honour), a ring (a sign of authority) and sandals

(a sign of freedom). Remember that North American spiritual *I got shoes, you got shoes, all of God's children got shoes?* The point of the song is that shoes or sandals are a sign that the wearer is not a bare foot slave or servant, but a family member. A celebration, with joy and feasting is ordered because the lost has been found. The younger son has come into his true identity, he is home.

There are, of course two sons, and the surprising thing is that the older son, who never left home and who appears to be a model of respectability, dedication and hard work is equally lost. It is hard for many of us not to feel a measure of sympathy for the older son. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the family situation, he certainly perceives himself as having been taken for granted. His frustration and resentment comes gushing out in words of anger, bitterness and rage. Yes, he was obedient and compliant, but as we all come to realise in life not all obedience is motivated by love. Fear, guilt, and a desire to manipulate God can lead to outward obedience.

The older son is very much like we ourselves may have been at times in our lives: seeing work as drudgery, battling on in our own strength, joyless and judgmental. We may have felt let down by others. The older son has pinned his identity on a contract arrangement, seeing his sonship as earned through grinding and unrelenting hard labour.

But the father doesn't want a servant – he wants a son! *Son, he says, you are always with me, all that is mine is yours.* We don't know any more about what happened. We are left wondering whether reconciliation between the brothers eventually came about. It does not matter. Jesus has made the point that God's love and welcome are always there for those who will accept it.

As fallible human beings we are like both sons, the younger with his sins of commission and the older with his sins of omission. God, our Heavenly Father loves us regardless. He earnestly desires that we live lives of joy confident in our identity not as slaves or servants, but as daughters and sons of the King himself.

There is a lovely story told about the Scottish pastor and hymn writer George Matheson whose preaching uplifted and instilled a sense of worth among all who heard him. A poor woman living in a dirty and dank cellar was among his congregation. One of the church elders came to visit her and was told she had moved. He found her in an attic apartment, just as poor, but clean, bright and airy. When he commented on this, she replied “Ye canna hear George Matheson preach, and live in a cellar”.

In the same way, we cannot hear the declarations of God’s great love for his creation and his creatures that recur in sacred scripture, and persist in choosing another way of life, or following but with grudging and joyless hearts. We are called to realise our true identity and move into the glorious freedom and liberty that is ours as God’s beloved daughters and sons

God calls us from our lostness, in whatever form that may be to take our rightful place as his cherished sons and daughters. If we are ever tempted to doubt this, just remember the robe, the ring and the sandals. Or sing a verse or two of *I got shoes, you got shoes!*

The Lord be with you.