**FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT**

**27th March 2022**

**First Reading Joshua 5:9-12**

What became the most important annual festival for the Jews, (and Christians) was the Passover, which marked the change from a life of servitude to one of freedom.

Egypt became a byword in Israelite tradition for sin, suffering and slavery. By the miracle of the Passover, God had saved them and Israel could now face the future. The chain of events had begun when death had ‘passed over’ the Jewish homes in Egypt. (Exodus 12;13) The reading to-day describes the first of an annual celebration to mark their arrival in the promised land. The meal of unleavened bread and roasted ears of corn that accompanied it was the first to use the new crops of a settled life.

A key element in the ceremony was that its performance united Jews of all ages. All previous generations were spiritually present with the living. This has translated into the Communion of the Saints and presence of the host, Jesus at each celebration of the Christian Eucharist.

About 1,800 B.C. Abram had been promised by his God, living room in what we later called Canaan or Palestine. At the time, it was sparsely occupied. However, when Abram’s descendants, under Joshua, six hundred years later tried to claim their inheritance, it was fully occupied. The defenders had better (iron) weapons, walled cities and were not going to submit easily.

Possession of the land was in its early stages when Israel ate of the produce of Canaan. Then the manna that fed them during the desert period ceased to be available to them. Like Israel the Church is born with a Passover and will end with the eternal Passover of salvation. But in between, its earthly journey will be sustained by the Eucharist, the miraculous food from heaven.

Last Sunday's second reading treated the manna as a type of the Eucharist. Today's Old Testament reading tells us that the manna ceased when the first Passover was celebrated in the Promised Land. So, too, the Eucharist will cease when it finds its fulfilment in the messianic banquet of the kingdom of God.

**Second Reading 2 Corinthians 5:17-2l**

The work of Christ is reconciliation. Not only reconciliation with Abram’s God, but between human beings of all cultures. According to Paul this was achieved through his death on Good Friday. This reconciliation we call the Atonement. From what the New Testament says about it, forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ is clearly one of the very earliest convictions of the first generation Christians. However, with the reflection that time provides, it seemed to be illogical and became more difficult to defend.

Over the years, different attempts have been made by theologians to explain how God forgives us though the death of his son. There are four principal attempts. But none are themselves without philosophical difficulties and the Catholic Church has not preferred any one above the others.

We must remember that they are all human insights to help us understand ideas that are really beyond our understanding. One or other argument may help someone come to terms with what otherwise is difficult to believe. No-one could find all theories convincing. God is not restricted to any one theory of the Atonement and neither do we have to choose the correct one to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

The reason I mention the subject is because it will be noticed that in the reading to-day, Paul talks about reconciliation, but nowhere mentions Christ’s death. It is as if reconciliation is achieved through the events in Bethlehem rather than through those at Calvary. And in the Gospel for to-day, the father forgives his son without any propitiation whatever.

The work of Christ, in fact, takes one back beyond Abraham to the very beginnings of the world. In Paul’s letter, it is nothing less than a new beginning. It establishes again the original friendship of God with humanity (see Genesis 2).

Where Jesus is, there is God; and God is God for us. It was for our sake that God made him 'to be sin' (5:21); that is, God had sent his Son 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' (Rom 8:3), in order to become a sacrifice for sin.

By dying in his flesh, the universal end of humanity, and by rising in a body made new, Christ himself and in him all humanity passed from the carnal to the spiritual life. The Church has been commissioned to carry on his redeeming work, by exhorting people to repent and by imparting, through the sacraments, the effects of Christ's death and resurrection. It devotes the period of Lent to this exhortation.

**Gospel Luke 15:1-3 and 11-32**

The Gospel in the Sunday Missal for to-day omits verses 4 to 10 which means that Luke’s words ‘*So he spoke this parable to them*’ does not in fact refer to the story which follows as it appears to. What are omitted are the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The third story is often called The Prodigal Son. (see footnote) but this is misleading. The point of the story is not that the young man was spendthrift, but that like the sheep and coin, he also was lost. It seems that this is the common thread which is why Luke grouped them together.

But, though the story is so well-known, it is not known well enough. There are striking differences between the three stories and different lessons to be derived from them. Verse 10 concludes the first two stories by emphasising the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. But it is the joy and not the repentance that is the point for it is difficult to imagine the repentance of either a coin or a sheep. And in the third story the lost son would not have repented at all or returned home if his resources had not dried up. So often, the story is used in our penitential services to stimulate remorse but the prodigal son is hardly a good model. No! The lesson of all three stories is the graciousness of God.

The first story is a tale of one in a hundred being lost. The second is of one lost out of ten, but the third is not one of two, but two of two. Both sons were lost, for neither really knew their father. The younger one came to be reconciled even though it was not to his credit. The older one is left making up his mind. But the common thread of all is the joy in heaven among the angels. It is a lesson in the nature of God.

Another frequent mistake we make is to identify the younger son with the lapsed teenager of to-day who does not take his faith as seriously as we would like. No! It is unlikely that we will ever have met anyone quite as lost as the younger son of Jesus’ tale. Both sons may be lost, but the difference between them is staggering. The younger one has deliberately chosen to put himself beyond hope. In a foreign country, beyond the limits of God’s sight, eating the food of swine, and friendless, he is *in extremis*. No human being could be further from home or more depraved or less civilised.

No ordinary sinner such as ourselves could ever be so lost. By contrast, we are at home, but like the elder son, do we realise how fortunate we are? Do we take our place in society for granted? With the story being open-ended, it is the elder son who is challenged to respond. Herein lies the lesson for those who heard this story for the first time.

One common view is that the father's generous response would be surprising to Jesus' Jewish audience. This is far from true, for Jewish tradition saw fathers as loving their children as God is always reaching out to bring the sinner home.

In the letter to the Corinthians (above) Paul does not find it necessary to mention the work of Christ on the Cross in considering the reconciliation of God the Father and his children. So, also in the Gospel the reunion is a simple illustration of God's readiness to forgive without conditions. This forgiveness should be in response to repentance, but may even be without it. (Also consider that neither is Christ’s sacrifice mentioned in the ‘Our Father …….’ or in John 3;16, which is so often quoted as the heart of the Gospel).

On many counts this is a disturbing story for us Christians of today. In hearing it, the most difficult part is to know which character represents us. In Jesus’ mind, did he mean his audience to see themselves as the older or the younger son? Or was it the father? If so, is it a lesson in the forgiving attitude we should have towards sinners?

We can find comfort in the warm treatment of both sons. But always, there is the father. He is the real challenge. Our gracious and forgiving God holds the stage. In fact the only character we may not play is the fatted calf.

**Footnote**

**Prodigal Son**. Prodigal means wasteful. This title was added to the page header by the printer of the 1611 Authorised Version of the Bible. It does not occur in the text and misses the point which is that the son was lost. The fact that he was wasteful simply heightens the degree of estrangement from his Father and forces him to consider a return home.