

READING AND PRAYERS FOR March 30, Lent 4

Collect

God of patient love,
you await the return of the wayward and wandering
and eagerly embrace them in pardon.

Through baptism you have clothed us
with the glory of Christ
and restored our inheritance
as your beloved daughters and sons.

Give us generous hearts
to welcome all who seek a place
at the table of your unconditional love.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Joshua 5:9-12: *Our reading begins with the Lord telling His people that His rescue of them from Egypt is complete – they are now in the Promised Land. The people celebrated, giving thanks to God. Manna is no longer needed as the people can eat the produce of the land. In the same way, through Jesus Christ, God’s rescue of us is complete. We too are free from the power of sin and death and enter the Promised Land of the Kingdom of God! We celebrate, giving thanks (“eucharist”) to God.*

The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

2 Corinthians 5: 17-21: *Paul wrote of the radical change that a believer undergoes when united to Christ. It is as if we become a “new creation.” Paul certainly experienced this first hand when he went from being Saul, the Pharisaic oppressor of Christians, to becoming a Christian himself. He wrote of God’s reconciling love, saying that we are to be “ambassadors” (representatives) of God by being reconciled to all people.*

Brothers and Sisters: ¹⁷If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, * not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32: *The dregs of society had been coming to Jesus, which caused the Pharisees to grumble about him. Jesus told three parables to show that no one is beyond God's mercy: A lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. We hear only the parable of the lost son (usually mistakenly referred to as the "prodigal" son) in today's Gospel reading. In all three parables someone seeks what is lost, finds it, and there is costly rejoicing. Once we were lost, but God sought us out and found us too, at great cost, namely Jesus' blood shed on the cross. Truly, nobody is beyond God's mercy!*

All the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So Jesus told them this parable:

'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So, he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But

the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

The Pharisees were grumbling, as the religious folk like to do, over the outrageousness of God’s grace. Their charge against Jesus was “This man receives sinners and He eats with them.” That charge is the best news you and I could hear. Jesus receives sinners and he eats with them. There’s room for you too, if you are humble enough to see yourself in that crowd. It would be great news for the Pharisees and scribes too, if they would hear it. But they would have to see themselves as sinners too, something those proud men were not going to do.

Jesus told the Pharisees and scribes this parable, with the tax collectors and crowds listening in. Actually Jesus told them three parables - a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. The parables of the lost sheep and coin set the pattern and prime the parable pump. A sheep is lost, and a shepherd recklessly leaves 99 sheep alone in the wilderness to seek and save the one. Not the way you and I would manage sheep is it, but then, we’re not the good shepherd, are we? And when the wayward sheep is found and returned to the flock, there is rejoicing and a party, where another sheep was likely barbecued for the event. You do the math.

You get the pattern: lost, sought, found, rejoicing. Jesus says, “There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous who do not need repentance,” as if there actually were even one righteous person. Lost, sought, found, rejoicing.

Now you're ready for the main event: the parable of the man with two sons, both of whom are lost. Yet this parable offers hope to both sons. The younger son couldn't wait for his father to drop dead, and so demanded his inheritance ahead of time. And the father agreed. He dropped dead to his assets, divided his property between them - the older son got the land, the younger son got the money. That's how it worked in those days. The younger son could then take his inheritance and buy some land. As is typical of young men who come into money a little too soon in life, he wasted it. The text says he squandered it in dissolute living. I doubt that means he wasted it on bad investments. The word dissolute means recklessly abandoned to sensual pleasures. Not the first young man to do so, nor the last.

His brother says it was on prostitutes, but what does he know? Regardless, the kid winds up slopping hogs on a Gentile's pig farm, which is about as low as it gets for a good Jewish boy. About the time pig food began to look tasty, he comes to his senses. He has a plan - confess his sin, strike a deal. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." That's a good confession. Tells it like it is. Sin is not only against others, but against God. Then he has a bargain, a deal to strike: "Make me one of your hired hands."

And off he goes with his confession and his deal back to his father's house. As he comes over the crest of the last hill, while he is still a speck on the horizon, his father comes running down the road to meet him. This is never done in middle eastern society, by the way. Wayward sons walk every inch, and they grovel the last few, with his father watching, tapping his foot and his arms crossed. But this father, in full view of the neighbours and the whole community, runs out to meet the son that wanted him dead. And if that wasn't outrageous enough, he lifts up his robes and runs. Men don't act in such a manner in middle eastern society. Women, traditionally, do the lifting of robes and the running, after young children, chickens, whatever. Then this father further shocks the neighbours when he embraces and kisses the boy, who still reeks of pigs, before he even gets a word of confession out of his mouth. His father's embrace covered his mouth.

You and I, though, are that lost son in the pig pen. The Father embraces us as we are, reeking, rebellious, lost. He puts that robe of Jesus' righteousness on us, covering our sin with Jesus' perfection. He slips the son's signet ring on our finger, marking us as family. He embraces us in a love that doesn't ask for deals or bargains. 200-proof, 24-karat grace - undeserved, unmerited, unconditional, amazing, outrageous grace. The shepherd sought out the lost sheep; the woman searched for the lost coin. No one sought out the lost son, though the father

obviously was looking down the road every day. Some suggest his older brother, the Pharisees and scribes, should have gone to the lost and the least, but I think Jesus breaks the pattern to leave room for himself.

See, he is the older brother, not in this parable, but of us all, the first-born of all creation, who sought and saved us from the pigpen even before we got the bright idea to make a confession and try to cut a religious deal. He joined us in the slop of our sin; in fact, he became our sin. He died our death, and rose from the dead. He became lost so that we might be found in him. The Father had to celebrate, because his Son, Jesus, was dead and is alive again.

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Concluding Prayers

Let us pray for the catechumens, those preparing for baptism, for their Catechists and Sponsors, and for all the holy people of God that we may embrace the folly of the cross and become ministers of reconciliation in a broken world.

Let us pray for this nation and all nations, for Charles, our king, and for those who govern in this nation and in all the nations of the earth that we ..generously share the produce of the land, both in plenty and in want

Let us pray for the alienated and rejected of this world, that all may come to know God's welcome to sit down at table.

Let us pray for our Parish, that we may learn from God to seek the lost and to rejoice when they are found.

Let us pray for our own needs and those of others, that God may be our hope and consolation.

Through Christ you make us a new creation, O God,
for with him we pass from sin to the new life of grace.
Accept our prayers in the warm embrace of your compassion,
And welcome all people to the festive banquet of your table,
Where we may rejoice in your love
And celebrate the inheritance you have given to us.
We ask this through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

For our Parish.

O GOD the Holy Ghost, Sanctifier of the faithful:
Sanctify this parish by thine abiding presence
especially at this time when some feel they cannot gather together.
Enlighten the minds of thy people more and more
with the light of the everlasting Gospel.
Bring erring souls to the knowledge of God our Saviour;
and those who are walking in the way of life,
keep steadfast unto the end.
Give patience to the sick and afflicted,
and renew them in body and soul.
Guard from forgetfulness of thee those who are strong and prosperous.
Increase in us thy manifold gifts of grace,
and make us all to be fruitful in good works;
O blessed Spirit, whom with the Father and the Son together
we worship and glorify, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name
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.

THE peace of God,
which passeth all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord:
And the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
be amongst you and remain with you always. *Amen*