Lent 4 Year C 2022

Luke 15; 1-3

So, today’s Gospel reading – let’s begin at the beginning, usually a good place to start – the beginning of Luke 15 – often overlooked in our rush to enjoy the reinstatement of the prodigal son and our self- righteous indignation about his unforgiving brother – or perhaps our indignation with the younger brother getting off so lightly in spite of his appalling behaviour, and our support or sympathy for the older one.

But before we get to the parable we have ‘All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling, and saying ‘’This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’’.’ This puts the parable into context. And that context is worth thinking about. We have Jesus and two groups of people; group one is comprised of tax collectors and sinners. The second group is the Pharisees and scribes. Group 1 comes to listen and observe – what is he saying, what is he doing? Group 2 comes to listen and complain.

Direct taxes – poll tax. land tax, was collected by agents of the State – Rome or, in Galilee, Herod. These tax collectors would have been collecting indirect taxes – tolls for crossing bridges or entering through city gates. They paid up front the amount they were expected to collect, and then had to recover that money, and they charged whatever they could get away with in order to turn a profit – and in many cases a very handsome profit. Popularly regarded as totally dishonest and disreputable, no self-respecting Law abiding Jew would have anything to do with these tax collectors. And yet Jesus not only talks to them, he has table fellowship with them! Remember the calling of Levi in Luke chapter 5. He was sitting in his tax booth when Jesus said ‘Follow me’, and he got up and followed, and then organised a meal – Luke calls it a great banquet – to which other tax collectors were invited. When Jesus hears the Pharisees and scribes complaining about his behaviour, Jesus tells them that he has come ‘to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance’. And later in Luke’s Gospel we will meet Zacchaeus, the very little man who climbed into a sycamore tree – you will remember that from the song you sang in Sunday School. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, doubly rich, doubly damned – and Jesus tells him, and the crowd, ‘the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost’.

So those are the tax collectors – what about the sinners? They weren’t necessarily leading immoral lives; it could be that their employment put them outside the Law – pedlars, donkey drivers, tanners, shepherds, and of course, tax collectors. And they certainly wouldn’t have time, or the ability, to study the Law to make sure they kept it. And these are the people who gather around Jesus to listen to him.

The Pharisees and the scribes, on the other hand, don’t come to listen and learn, they come to complain. Why does he associate with these people? Why does he eat with them? Eating with people is a sign of approval. How could he possibly approve? How irreligious can Jesus be? they ask.

Both Jesus and the Pharisees believe in the importance of fellowship meals. To break bread with others was to accept them, to honour them, to share with them – and so the Pharisees grumble. Jesus is breaking bread with those who are unacceptable, those to whom they would offer no fellowship, those with whom they would never share anything – not even the time of day. Before a sinner could come to their table they had to repent of their sins – and clearly for many people that was a social or economic impossibility. Jesus comes to this scenario from a completely different angle. He doesn’t demand repentance as a condition of offering fellowship – he offers fellowship in the hope (although by no means the certainty) of conversion. Zacchaeus doesn’t have to repent of his exploitative behaviour before Jesus will sit down with him – he repents because Jesus has sat down with him. Jesus offers him respect, not threat, and affirms him as a child of God, who has, unfortunately, gone astray – but he is still a child of God – a position the Pharisees cannot countenance. They want to treat such people as moral lepers – is that likely to bring them closer to God? No way, says Jesus. Start from the other end, bring them closer to God and there is a chance they might change. Love and forgiveness are offered not as a reward, but as a means – in the hope that change and renewal, where possible, will be the outcome. Love and forgiveness are an expression of the God we say we believe in – an expression of Jesus’ understanding of his Father.

And so we come to the parable of the prodigal son – or, as I prefer to call it, the parable of the loving father and his two sons, both of whom he loses. At the beginning, the younger son more or less tells his father that he wishes he was dead, so he can get his hands on the inheritance. Meanwhile, we hear of the older son, full of resentment and righteous indignation – I spoke about that last week – destroys what little relationship he has with his father by refusing to accept his father’s right to offer love and forgiveness, even though he – the older son – has received his share of the inheritance – remember, it was divided between them. He didn’t need his father to give him a goat, the goats belong to him, but he cannot get rid of the feeling of grudging, familial indebtedness and subservience; he now owns the farm but still sees himself as his father’s slave – even though his father tells him ‘all that is mine is yours’.

The father welcomes back in joyful table fellowship his wasteful younger son, killing the calf and inviting all his neighbours to the feast, and he appeals to the elder one to join the celebration. Is this an appeal by Jesus to the Pharisees to stop complaining about his table fellowship, to treat sinners with kindness and respect, to show them God’s love rather than the rule book? The father’s love reaches out to both his sons, he includes the younger in spite of what he has done and encourages the elder to move from separation to inclusion. Will he come in? Will he feel welcome amongst the neighbours who have responded to the father’s forgiveness and his obvious joy?

I have said this so many times – this is the Lord’s Table – not mine, not yours – the Lord’s. Would any of us have the temerity to turn someone away ‘because they are not good enough’, don’t belong, don’t deserve?

This table should be open to all and the door should always stand open – at least metaphorically – and physically today!