

## Reflection for Lent 4 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

This Sunday is the 4<sup>th</sup> in Lent, but it is more commonly referred to in the UK as Mothering Sunday - a day on which we lay aside the season of penitence and fasting and replace it with a day of joy and thanksgiving – a day which traditionally focus on one person – our mother.

All of us have had a mother, whether they are with us today or not, and today we recall the part they played not only in our birth, but also in helping us to grow, in moulding us into the people that we are today. That mothering or parenting role!

Often, they are the ones who are there in our moments of joy and sadness, feeling within themselves all whole raft of emotions, often in an inexpressible way. Often too they are the ones who do so much in the background - much more than we really appreciate at the time. It is only as we look back that we begin to appreciate what they did for us.

For some, this role may not have been filled by our biological mothers but by someone else. Fulfilling this role is never easy, as those who are or have been parents will testify. One of the hardest things is being prepared to let go, even when you can see the possible problems lying just round the corner. You love the child in your charge are concerned about them and their welfare, yet there comes a point where you must let go as there are some lessons in life that can only be learned as you step out, taking the rough with the smooth.

As a parent, you hold firmly to the hope that your child still loves you, knows that you are there - a caring place to come back to if needed.

The parable of the prodigal son highlights exactly that: letting go, yet still loving.

In the parable, the father in the story has two sons.

The youngest is headstrong and thinks he knows best – asking his father for the share of property he is due to receive on his father's death. Rightly or wrongly the father agrees. and off sets the youngster on the journey of a lifetime.

He is free! He can do what he likes! No parental constraints! His life is his own!

That's fine at first but he squanders his wealth in the wildest extravagances.

Then reality strikes. What does he do now?

He is out of money and a famine begins. The first may be his own fault, but the latter only makes things worse. Food is short, prices high and rising. He finds himself lacking even the basics of life, and homeless.

In desperation he looks around for what work is available, caring for pigs: and Jesus includes this to highlight just how far he has fallen. For a Jew, this was the final insult, caring for unclean animals that he would never eat. His world had fallen apart and the pigs were probably of more value than him. Disillusionment sets in.

At this point he reflects on hopeless of his situation, and decides to return home, confess his faults and ask to be taken on as one of his father's servants.

*"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.'"*

Meanwhile back at home, his father has not forgotten his son: he keeps hoping and praying that he will one day return.

As the young man approaches, the father's love and compassion for his son comes to the fore. He runs and greets his son, hearing little of what the young man has to say by way of an

explanation and confession, but rather getting plans in operation for a great celebration - a welcome home party.

*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!"*

What lies at the very heart of this parable is the picture of a father willing to let go, prepared not to interfere where he is not wanted, whose love is constant, ever hoping beyond hope that his son will return - a father whose arms open wide to greet his son, not interested in explanations but simply thankful that what was lost has returned.

That, too, is a picture of God's relationship with us.

A God who created the world and humanity to tend for that creation.

A God who loves us and looks for us to return that love, yet a God who will not force obedience on us with some big stick or make us little more than robots - only able to obey.

A God prepared to allow us to go our own way, hoping that we will turn back to him; and when we do the promise is there of arms open wide, regardless of who we are or what we may have done: love that never fails.

Having painted such a picture, one important thing needs to be mentioned, which is that, despite the father's love, it was up to the son to take the risk, prompted by circumstances, to get up and go home. He could have chosen to stay where he was - wallowing in disillusionment - and, if he had, he would never have known the extent of his father's love.

He had to take action - get up and go home, in doing so opening up the possibility of a new beginning.

The same is true for each of us. To know God's love we too must begin that journey back to toward God, then what lies before us possibility of a new beginning, a new relationship.

In the liturgy of the Affirmation of Baptism we are reminded of the journey back to God.

The Christian life means turning from evil and turning to Christ.

Do you renounce evil?

Do you repent of sin?

Do you turn to Christ?

Will you follow Christ?

Each one of these questions in a different way is asking the same thing. Are you still going your own way, ignoring God our heavenly Father or have you, like the young son, turned away from self and back towards God and the love he offers.

Baptism is the great symbol and sacrament of renewal, of turning from darkness to light, of placing God at the centre, of accepting the love he offers each one of us, of becoming a new person in Christ.

It does each of us no harm on this Mothering Sunday to ponder afresh this parable that we know so well and ask which way am I going?

Am I walking away from God or returning to God?

As we do so to also marvel and give thanks for those arms outstretched and waiting for us.

*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!"*