

## Lenten Homilies for Year C (Part 2)

(In the second half of Lent in the Gospels for Year C we have two stories about God's forgiveness and mercy: The Parable of the Prodigal Son (from St Luke), and the Woman Taken in Adultery (from St John). As always the Sixth Sunday (Palm Sunday) we have both the Reading of Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem and St Luke's account of the Passion.)

### Fourth Sunday of Lent 2004

So with whom do you most identify? The Younger Son... the Father... the Older Son?

In reflection groups this past week someone told us how they usually identify with the Older Son, but for some reason this time they struck a chord with the Father and his feelings of a child leaving home, and welcoming a child back.

Another person latched on to the sheer isolation – the total abandonment – of the Younger Son when he had lost all his money and was in a strange land with no-one to help or understand him. Perhaps this is what many refugees and asylum seekers feel like.

Someone else was struck by the basic trust of the Younger Son just knowing that his Father would forgive him and receive him back. It says something about his upbringing that he remembered that love and had sufficient trust to go back.

And so the reflections on this story go on – sometimes about the Older Son and his jealousy, sometimes about the Father's acceptance etc. etc.

The power of the Word of God, of the Gospel is its ability to speak to us today – if we allow it – not so much at the head-level, though it can and does speak to us like that as well. Rather more important with a story like this is how it strikes us at the level of FEELINGS – in the heart, in the gut. When it does work in this way the Word of God is alive and active.

Is this story properly called *The Prodigal Son*? Should it be entitled the Prodigal Father (wasteful of his love)? - Or the story of the Jealous Brother? – Who knows? What is important is that it should be allowed to speak to us – just as we are – addressing our own needs **today** for God's love and forgiveness and healing.

### Fourth Sunday of Lent 2007

That parable is just so rich in meaning that every time we come to it there is a new angle to be explored. Today I just want to take one point from each of the three main characters in the story and develop them a bit more.

1. The Younger Son admits his guilt, his responsibility, "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.*" It is endemic in our culture not to accept responsibility when something goes wrong. Government ministers not accepting responsibility when things go wrong in their departments – not admitting liability for poor services rendered – NHS, you name it. Admitting responsibility seems to be the last refuge of the scoundrel who has no more excuses left. From the beginning Adam and Eve. But only in admitting responsibility can the process of reconciliation begin – only then can the healing start.
2. The Father **runs** to meet the Son. Clearly in the story the Father represents God and what an incredible image of God this is – God **running** to meet the repentant son. This shows just how much God wants to forgive, to reconcile, and to make whole again. God actually running to meet and embrace the sinner who is ready to accept responsibility, ready to admit guilt. Even before he has a chance to say it out loud, God runs to embrace. That image alone is one we could sit with for hours at a time.

3. In the midst of all of this love this intimacy, is the sad figure of the Elder Brother. It is clear from how he describes his life in his father's household that he feels more like a dutiful slave than a free, much-loved Son. He cuts a sad figure. But what is our attitude, my attitude to being in the Father's house – of trying to live the Christian life?

Drudgery, forced-labour or freedom and life itself.

It is clear from the image of God given us in the Father of the story how it is that Jesus want us to see things.

#### **Fourth Sunday of Lent 2010**

As a confessor or spiritual guide, whenever someone presents themselves as filled with fear and guilt and doubt about whether they could ever be forgiven for what they have done, the worst thing to suggest is that they go back to their God and pray about this. Why? – because in this case God **is** the problem, or rather it is their image of God as a vengeful tyrant, a bully, always ready to pounce on them when they make a mistake – this is the source of their problem.

The true image of God is only revealed to us in the Scriptures – in both testaments – and we believe that in Jesus we meet the fullness of God's revelation of who God is. What we find in our Bible is a complex picture. We find that God is not a bully, or a vengeful tyrant, but God does invite a high standard of behaviour on our part. At another extreme of images, God is not a sugar-daddy always ready to indulge our every whim, and yet God is always a loving Person, ready to respond to our needs.

Over these Sundays of Lent we have gradually been building up a pretty comprehensive picture of God in our Readings. On the First Sunday we saw in Jesus being tempted by the devil – a God who does not cut corners but who is willing to share in all the dilemmas and difficulties which a human person has to face in life. On the Second Sunday in the story of the Transfiguration we heard the Father say, *"This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him"*. And last week we heard of a patient God, one who is full of love and compassion.

Now, today, we are given more details about this God. St. Paul summarises all that Jesus was doing in one neat phrase, *"God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself."* This is the essence of what Jesus is about – reconciling the world to its Creator, making it at one, at peace and harmony.

In the Gospel, among the great richness of the story of the Prodigal Son with its various, vivid characters, we are given another part of the complex figure of God in the Father of the two sons, who is clearly representing God in this story. Not only is this father willing to let his son be himself, even if it is a wasteful self, when he sees his son returning *"while still a long way off, he is moved with pity and runs to him."* The Father **runs** to the Son to embrace him. This is God going out of the way to reconcile. He throws a great party in celebration and notice that he comes out of the house. He leaves everybody behind, to go out to talk to, to plead with his elder son. This is how badly God wants us to be reconciled.

There is, of course, a famous painting by Rembrandt that tries to capture one of the moments in this story – the moment the Father embraces the returning Prodigal Son. We have a poster depicting part from that painting here in church. It is actually only the bottom left-hand corner of a huge but dark and brooding painting in which other characters, including the Elder Brother, witness this moment. But just one detail from the part of the painting we have on the poster is worth noting – the hands of the Father clasping his son do not seem to come from the same person – the left-hand is large, firm and strong, clearly used to hard work, whereas the right is slim, fair and soft. It is almost as if one hand is masculine, the other feminine – which, of course, makes it all the better and more accurate as a depiction of this paradox of a God who is, strong and firm but also a leader, loving and patient and is always ready to welcome us.

#### **Fourth Sunday of Lent 2013**

I wonder whether the older son finally went into the party or not. We are deliberately left guessing about what

happened next and that is part of the power of this story. Clearly this older son is akin to the Pharisees and Scribes to whom the parable is addressed. For that matter this older son is like anyone who sees religion as mere drudgery, keeping the rules in a joyless, holier-than-thou manner. But while well-crafted parables like this may tell us something about ourselves, their main purpose is to tell us something about God.

The father in this story is, of course, the God-figure – a figure who three times during this story gives us an insight into who this God of ours really is.

In the First Scene we find a Father who is willing to go beyond convention and who allows the Younger Son the freedom to go off and do what he wants. Already we see both generosity and an unwillingness to coerce people. This Father, this God, is a God who generously offers his creatures freedom.

The Second Scene involving the Father is on the return of the Younger Son. Once again we see someone defying convention and being incredibly generous. In ancient times an elder never, ever **ran** towards lesser beings. It was always the other way round – the younger had, in humility, to approach his elder. But here, *“While he was still a long way off his Father ran to meet him.”*

Now, you might think that having given his Son his rightful inheritance he had discharged himself of any obligations towards him legally. Being allowed to return as one of his Father’s paid servants, as the Younger Son had imagined for himself, even that would seem very generous but, Oh no! Much more is on offer – a good wash, clean clothes and shoes, jewellery and a big party – **and received back as son**. This is way more than just being **reasonably** generous, in a way this is being abundantly generous – and this is who our God is.

The Third and final Scene is with the Older Son who is in a huff. We may well think that he has some justification for his attitude – a fair return for a fair day’s work, and perhaps, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth would seem to underlie his attitude. He cannot understand why his Father would break the rules and be so forgiving – and yet our God is a God who breaks the rules, because the one rule that counts is the absolute love for the other which God always has for us. And once again in that incredible love and freedom, the Older Son is left free to accept this generosity or not – just as we are.

### Fourth Sunday in Lent 2019

That is such a well-crafted story that it is endlessly fascinating to our imaginations. It even has a suspenseful ending. Does he or doesn’t he go in to the party? People are usually quite divided on that question. Some are adamant that the elder son remained stubborn, while others believe that the father’s love wins him over. In fact stubbornness is a key feature of all three characters.

The stubbornness of the elder son is easy to see. He refuses to join the party because he is bitter about the way his father has treated his wayward brother. In his view the brother does not deserve what is going on, but perhaps thinks that he does. The younger son had squandered his father’s inheritance – an inheritance he was not entitled to until his father had died, so asking for his share of the father’s estate was, in effect, wishing his father was dead! It is hardly surprising that the elder brother would be extremely annoyed by all of this, and we can sympathise with him on this one.

The younger son remains stubbornly self-centred throughout the story. He does not change his fundamental orientation towards his own self-interest. Firstly, he demands his share of his father’s estate before it is due to him. Then, having frittered it all away he is willing to do the most demeaning task for any observant Jew – tending a herd of pigs – all for his own benefit! Even his ‘repentance’ is based on self-interest. Realising he would be better off as one of his father’s servants, he rehearses a formula of words of contrition and heads off home for a better life. This is not the highest of motives we could imagine for a penitent!

The most stubborn of all the characters, however, is the father. He is stubbornly consistent in his approach to both sons. Not once does he try to coerce either of them. He allows the younger one to head off on the road to his own self-destruction, and then welcomes him back. Notice that this is no ordinary welcome back. The father is on the look out for his son and “runs” to meet him once he spots him in the distance. For sure the younger son eventually rattles off his words of penitence – his ‘act of contrition’ – but not before his father has embraced him and kissed

him: stubbornly on the look out for reconciliation.

We see the same stubbornness in his dealings with his elder son. Once again this father makes the first move and comes out of the house to find his elder son to try to persuade him to come inside. As with the younger son so with the elder the father then lets his son speak his mind. In this case it is not a rehearsed set of words of repentance, rather it is an outpouring of bitterness and resentment. Having heard this tirade the father responds, not with criticism or coercion demanding his son's repentance for his words. Quite simply he stubbornly insists on the fact that it was only right to celebrate the younger son's 'return to life'. The clear implication is that the elder son should come and join in the rejoicing.

Stubbornness is usually held up as a negative attribute and certainly stubborn refusal to listen, to be open to hearing the Word of God is consistently condemned by Jesus in the Gospels. Indeed, it is condemned throughout the Scriptures – Old and New Testaments alike. There is, however, a kind of stubbornness that is very positive: the stubbornness of the father's love – a love equally for both his sons. We might call this stubbornness by a more positive word: 'persistence'. We realise that in the father we see a God represented as persistently, insistently and consistently reaching out in love to try to bring back any and all who have lost their way in life. When they do return, whatever the elder brother that is in all of us may think, it is a matter of rejoicing.

### Fifth Sunday of Lent 2004

It is an intriguing thought that when Jesus is found in dispute with the Pharisees in Jerusalem as in today's Gospel, St. Paul could not have been very far away. He was, after all, himself a Pharisee, and would certainly have known some of his fellow Pharisees who confronted Jesus at various times during his ministry. And he was very like them.

In today's Gospel Jesus confronts the Pharisees with the idea of **consistency**. If they are going to apply the law in all its force and vigour in the case of this woman, then they should apply the same code of law, with all its force and vigour, to **themselves** and **every** action that they are involved in.

The most conscientious of them who tried to do just that ended up tying themselves in knots and found pleasing a God of Law codes is impossible. This is what St. Paul is saying in that Second Reading today. He was a **very** conscientious Pharisee and we need not doubt that he tried his utmost to keep the Law in its entirety – but found no redemption in it. In fact, like the Pharisees as often portrayed in the Gospels, St. Paul fell into the trap of making the law into God – so **laws** became more important than the reason why the laws exist in the first place. They were meant to make it easier to worship and adore the living God. Instead they became an obstacle and instead of being life- **giving**, they became **death-inducing**.

They were literally death-inducing in the case of the Pharisees in today's Gospel baying for the woman's blood. They were also literally death-inducing for Paul when we meet him first looking after the coats of the people stoning Stephen to death early in the Acts of the Apostles, and then leading the band of armed men searching out other "*blasphemous*" Christians.

This over-stated attachment to laws and rules was death-inducing for Paul in another way. He tells us in that Second Reading, how he found it impossible to gain by his own efforts the perfection, the righteousness that comes from the Law. This was spiritual death to Paul – as it has been for countless others since Paul's time. Only faith in the living God who offers the mercy and forgiveness we need gives life and hope.

This is the consistency Jesus wants the Pharisees to see, and why he tells the woman to go away and sin no more. In receiving the mercy and forgiveness we need, we are invited to build on that support and offer it to others, and to change our lives.

St. Paul's discovery of salvation, of redemption, coming from faith and not from his own efforts at doing good/keeping the law – didn't lead him to stop working and preaching. Elsewhere in his letters we find Paul boasting of all that he has done in spreading the faith. He has made dangerous journeys all over the place as he has gone about spreading the Gospel. He has been shipwrecked, persecuted, stoned, imprisoned (in fact he writes this letter to the Philippians from a prison cell in Ephesus). And he is not yet finished, he tells us.

But at the end of the day he looks upon all this as so much rubbish (and rubbish is a polite translation of the word he uses) in comparison with learning and believing in Jesus Christ. It is here that he finds hope and redemption just as the woman finds mercy and forgiveness – just as we are invited to this Lent.

### Fifth Sunday of Lent 2007

Here we have a prime example of just how good a teacher Jesus was. In a very volatile, a very heated situation, he calms things down, takes the heat out of the situation and gets his message across brilliantly. He does it basically by holding up a mirror – that, in effect, is what his statement *“If there is anyone of you who has not sinned let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”*

The scribes and the Pharisees are all hot and bothered in their self-righteousness – proud up-holders of the Law of Moses, wanting to trick Jesus into making a mistake, trying to get the people on their side. So they drag a forlorn public sinner in front of Jesus keen to show how law abiding they were.

At first Jesus doesn't rise to their challenge – just doodles calmly away – but they persist. So he holds up a mirror to them, *“Look at yourselves, he is saying. “Look at yourselves and if any of you can honestly say that you are not in the same boat as this woman, then OK – go ahead.”* The eldest – usually associated with the wisest – recognises himself from what he is and begins the procession away from Jesus and the woman.

We can look on the Gospels of the last three Sundays as Jesus holding up a mirror to the people questioning him – turning the tables on them as it were. Two weeks ago people were speculating on how much more guilty some Galileans must have been to be put to death even while they were offering sacrifice in the Temple. Jesus responds, *“Unless you repent of **your** sins, you will suffer an even worse fate than they did.”* Last week the mirror held up to the Scribes and Pharisees complaining that Jesus welcomed and ate with tax collectors and sinners was the Parable of the Two Sons – *“Which one are you?”* he is saying. And now pointing the finger at an easy target other than themselves – the mirror is held up again, *“If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone.”*

This same mirror is being held up to us – on our speculations about others, our murmurings and grumblings about how others are welcomed and treated by God; and on our persistence in judging others for that they have done, whilst easily overlooking and forgetting our own shortcomings.

The technical term for this process is *“confrontation”* – because confrontation is not about violence, or squaring up to each other. It is about loving and caring for a person sufficiently to try to help them see for **themselves** where they need to change. And to love and care for them sufficiently to allow them to do this.

This is what Jesus does for the woman, for the Scribes and the Pharisees and for us – loving us and caring for us sufficiently to want and enable us to recognise our sinfulness, to repent and to be reconciled, and to offer the same reconciliation to others.

### Fifth Sunday of Lent 2010

***“Who do you think is too sinful to be part of your life, or the parish?”***

This is the ‘Question of the Week’ posed by a Website that each week proposes a question for reflection based on the Sunday Gospel.

Now keeping someone out of our personal lives is relatively easy. We could refuse to answer the door to them, walk in the opposite direction if we saw them in the street and so on. It's not so easy to keep someone out of the parish – thank God!

It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus turned no-one away who came to seek his help. He invites sinners to change, to repent, to mend their ways but he never rejects them. This is the original loving the sinner but hating the sin.

Sadly, for the Pharisees it seems that **exclusion** was a high priority for them. That is quite some public spectacle

that they make in today's Gospel – dragging that poor woman in front of the crowd who had surrounded Jesus, listening to his teaching. Making a great song and dance about how Moses prescribed death by stoning for such people. Full of their own self-righteousness and puffed up with pride in front of all those people. *"Only the pure, the upright, the good and the wholesome, like us, should be accepted by God."*

Jesus refuses to become entangled in a futile argument with them, and at first ignores them, until eventually their persistent questioning wears him down, but still he does not become embroiled in their dispute – only that one devastating sentence, *"If there is one among you who has not sinned, let him be the first to cast a stone."* Stunned silence.

As they go off one by one I'm sure some of them would be furious at the embarrassment that Jesus had brought on them by what he had just said and wants to find something else, but I like to think that one or two would have realized the error of their ways.

None of us has the right to judge others in terms of their sinfulness. We start and finish with ourselves. It is not up to us, thank God, to say that this person has a right to be a member of the parish and that person doesn't, or to decree who or who may not come to Communion. Those words *"let him who is without sin be the first to cast a stone"* are addressed to us today, just as much as they were addressed to those Pharisees.

But then, so are his words originally addressed to the woman – now addressed to **us** – *"Has no-one condemned you? Neither do I. Go and sin no more"*. Words like these are spoken to us throughout the Scriptures, each time we come to Mass, and each time we celebrate Reconciliation.

Welcome, In-clusion, Reconciliation – these are the words we celebrate and offer to all who seek God's help and forgiveness.

### **Fifth Sunday of Lent 2013**

Like many people here, I suspect, I was glued to the TV screen around 7pm on Wednesday waiting for the announcement of the new Pope. When the old French Cardinal tottered out on to the balcony and began the announcement my first thought was who is Cardinal George Bergoglio (Jorge)? But then when he announced that he had taken the name, *"Francis"* my reaction became, *"Oh wow! Yes, I like that!"* and everyone I have talked to since then has had much the same reaction – welcoming the symbolism of invoking St. Francis of Assisi as his patron for his new role.

There is no more popular saint in the Christian Calendar than St. Francis (try Googling his name!) In the popular imagination he is associated with love of the poor, of creation, he is associated with humility, but above all with simplicity. For me it is this simplicity that is a key to hope.

Whenever we are faced with something that is really so complicated that we cannot understand it, we cannot come to grips with it, we feel bewildered, powerless, anxious and possibly ultimately hopeless. We are in complete turmoil and our lives seem out of control.

It may be something in our personal lives out of control or the financial situation with the banks collapsing but some bankers still making absolute fortunes while everyone else suffers, leave us stunned and helpless. Managers of hospitals receiving huge pay rises when patients are not being cared for properly leaves us feeling exasperated. Cardinals saying one thing and apparently acting in a completely opposite way leave us feeling bewildered and even abandoned by our church – and so it goes on.

To begin, to even begin to get a handle on things, to begin to regain some control, some equilibrium in our lives – can only come about in simple ways that we can understand appreciate – basic fairness, basic honesty, basic care and respect for others. Perhaps this is the hope offered even just by invoking the thinking of St. Francis and his simplicity. And we can see some of the fruits of that simplicity in all three of our Readings.

In the Gospel the Scribes and Pharisees show no respect for the woman they make a spectacle of, and they try to trap Jesus in a complicated plot. If he agrees with them he could be seen to be publicly opposing the Roman

Authorities by calling for the woman's death. If he opposes the Pharisees he would seem to be agreeing with the pagan Roman authority and failing his own Jewish Faith. It's very complicated, but in a move of calm simplicity, Jesus cuts through the nonsense with his response and when left alone with the woman shows both compassion and firmness, "*Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*" – "*Go and change your way of doing things.*"

In the First Reading Isaiah is writing at the time of the end of the Exile of the Jewish People in Babylon – hundreds of miles from their homeland with mountains and great deserts to cross to get back to their homeland – but God is going to make their return as easy and as simple as possible, "*I am putting water in the wilderness to give my chosen people drink.*"

And finally there is St. Paul in our Second Reading – and for once in his writings being simple and straight-forward – contact with life, at peace with God and with himself because, "*I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts... All I want is to know Christ and the power of his Resurrection...*" Simplicity itself – a simplicity offered in Jesus' Death and Resurrection which we are preparing to celebrate in two weeks' time and which is alone the source and bedrock of our faith.

### Fifth Sunday of Lent 2016

That phrase, "making her stand there in full view of everybody", really struck home with me when I read this Gospel passage the other day. It is basic, ritual humiliation of this poor woman, and absolutely no mention, no equivalent treatment of the man involved in what had gone on. Presumably he has got away scot-free. There is no justice involved, and certainly no justification for what these scribes and Pharisees are doing. The woman is merely a pawn in their on-going games with Jesus. Sadly and to the great shame of many societies and institutions within them, using women like this as pawns, and worse, continues even today.

Jesus is never, ever, involved in such humiliation, such injustice, and we have much to learn *still* about this simple, and yet profound fact of the manner in which Jesus goes about his ministry – a ministry which is the ideal model for all ministry in our church.

Notice that what Jesus in fact does is to write in the dust on the ground – in other words he tries to defuse the situation, to lower the temperature a bit. Then he gently, but firmly confronts the accusers. Notice that confrontation is not about squaring up to them, as if on the point of starting a fight – that is not what is meant by true confrontation. What Jesus does is to offer the scribes and Pharisees a mirror – a mirror in which they are able to look at themselves, in which they are able to CONFRONT THEMSELVES. Then, beginning with the eldest (presumably the first one for whom the penny drops) they all slink away. Nothing more need be said. There are no words of condemnation even for the accusers, not just for the woman. The accusers have condemned themselves.

We are left with the question of whether these scribes and Pharisees learnt their lesson. Indeed we do not know if the woman learnt her lessons. It is all left hanging in the air because the point of the story is that we are being offered that same mirror to look at ourselves, and only we can answer the question about our own attitudes and behaviour.

During this last week one of the two bishops who represented our hierarchy at the Synod on the Family last October talked about his experience of that Synod – Bishop Peter Doyle of Northampton. During one of the weeks of the Synod the Bishops were divided up into a number of different language groupings. There were three such English-speaking groups made up of English-speaking bishops from across the world. The group bishop Doyle was in appears to have included a number of very vociferous senior cardinals and archbishops who were insisting on keeping very firmly to current rules about marriage, divorce and so on. Feeling utterly exasperated Bishop Doyle got up at one point and said, "Have none of **you** ever had to ask God for mercy?" His point is well made, and similar to that of Jesus to the scribes and the Pharisees in today's Gospel.

All three of our readings today echo a theme of hope and mercy for all who turn to God in their hour of need. "No need to recall the past. No need to think about what was done before," writes Isaiah in our First Reading. "I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the Law, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ," writes St Paul. "Neither do I condemn you," Jesus says to the woman, "Go away and don't sin any more." – words that imply that there will always be a loving, merciful welcoming

embrace from God any time we turn to seek forgiveness, no matter we may think that we have done to deserve condemnation. Condemnation is never a response of God to any repentant sinner.

### **Fifth Sunday of Lent 2019**

Just to be fair to the Law of Moses – referred to in our Gospel today by the Pharisees and the Scribes – it condemned BOTH partners in adultery to death by stoning. Such a law is, in our eyes, utterly barbaric and, when we hear of such things happening even today in different parts of the world, we are justifiably outraged. What is particularly galling in this incident in the Gospel, however, is the fact that it is only the woman who is dragged out to receive the punishment specified by the Law.

In the old epithet, “It takes two to tango,” and yet the man gets away un-scathed, and without even being identified. In complete contrast not only is the woman the only one to be charged with the offence, she is dragged into a very public place in the Temple to be humiliated in front of everyone. It is completely imbalanced and unjust – even in Jewish Law. It is patriarchy doing its worst.

The woman is not afforded a shred of dignity by these Jewish officials, who have only one thing in mind, to catch Jesus in a trap that they can then use against him. What we see in Jesus, on the other hand, is someone who is not only well able for their tricks but, above all else, someone who gives back dignity and respect to the woman in a totally different approach to sin and law-breaking.

Last week we heard in our parable how the father welcomed the younger son back by throwing a party and having him dressed in a fine cloak and with a ring on his finger. Having returned home destitute and in ragged clothing – all through his own fault, remember – nevertheless, his dignity is restored. Respect for the dignity of all people is clearly an important aspect of Jesus’ ministry. It is something that we see throughout the Gospels. In fact most of the healing miracles – cures of leprosy and paralysis, for example – are ways in which people who have lost their dignity and been excluded from full participation in the life of the community are now to be fully restored to their rightful and life-fulfilling position amongst family and friends.

Restoration, as opposed to retribution, is the hallmark of Jesus’ approach to sin and wrongdoing. How it came about that for so long, in so many Christian churches, retribution became paramount is difficult to comprehend, though it is a very basic, almost animal like urge deep within us. We took this even further when for centuries many people put forward the idea that Jesus’ death on the Cross was a ransom paid to God the Father on our behalf because we did not have the capacity to pay. We even sing about it in some of our hymns, “(God) sent him to die, I scarce can take it in.”

If that is all that matters - that Jesus died on the Cross – then only about 3 days of his life have any meaning for us. In effect, we could forget the rest of his ministry as irrelevant. However, God sent his Son to live a fully human life, and to live it in a manner that shows the rest of humankind how we are called to live. Jesus’ death on the Cross was a consequence of the inability of people to cope with someone who turned so many rules that supported those who hold power over others upside down. Jesus’ death was a vindictive denunciation of the ability of love to subvert systems of power, but in the Resurrection loves triumphs.

Our faith does not simply call us to be grateful to Jesus for dying for our sins – which we are indeed called upon to do. We are called above all in life to imitate Jesus, to follow in his footsteps, to embody the values that he showed in his life. When it comes to sin the old adage remains very true, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” We are always loved by God who wants only to forgive, to reconcile, to make whole again. God is a God of restoration not retribution.

I came across a quotation the other day that purports to be a paraphrase of something said by St Therese of Lisieux, “The only part of science God does not understand is addition and subtraction.” God does not look at life marking out a ledger balancing income and expenditure. God is a God not of retribution but restoration.

### **Palm Sunday 2004**

A letter arrived this morning addressed to the ‘Fund Raiser/Entertainments Organiser’ c/o St. Joseph’s Church. It

came from the Sales Executive of the Regal Greyhound Stadium, Sunderland – Sunderland Dog Track. It offered ideas as to how church groups might do some effective fund-raising by organising groups to go to an evening at the dog-track. Enclosed was an invitation *“Enjoy Easter With Us – Special Offer” – all kinds of goodies for £10 – next Saturday Evening. – Holy Saturday Night!!*

There’s nothing really to say here is there?

As in every other week of our busy lives all manner of things will be clampering for our attention – work, family, shopping, holidays, and sports events – dog-track racing, and so on. This is life as it is lived today – and by and large no notice is taken at all in our society of what this week is about. It is now generally called Easter Week – not Holy Week.

We don’t live lives of enclosed orders of religious sisters and brothers who can devote the whole of this week to matters religious. But unless we plan and mark off time to spend with the events of this week – taking bits of the Passion to reflect on each day, coming to some of the celebrations, we will miss meeting this quiet, dignified innocent figure of St. Luke’s account of the Passion. We will miss realising the incredible compassion on this man who offers forgiveness to his killers, and to the repentant thief.

And if we miss out on this nothing changes for us. Yet we are about to profess in our Creed the fact that we believe nothing remains the same for us or for the whole world – because of the events we celebrate. Celebrate or going to the dogs?

### **Palm Sunday 2013**

If your immediate reaction to having just the short Gospel and not the full Passion Narrative is one of relief then perhaps you might want to check that out.

I am a firm believer in the adage that *“Less is More”*. What I am hoping is that giving just that short extract will whet your appetite for spending some time in the days ahead to read the full version of Jesus’ Passion and Death according to St. Luke, at home. The actions here lead themselves to a dramatic reconstruction of these events in our own minds and imaginations. This is the kind of prayer encouraged by St. Ignatius of Loyola to enable people to come to a deeper appreciation and understanding not just of the events themselves, but of ourselves and our current relationship with God in Christ.

All four Gospels give us basically the same story and we know it well enough, but there are little variations in each of them. Here in St. Luke’s account, for example, we find Jesus meeting the women of Jerusalem, we have that piece about the Repentant Thief. In spending time reflecting on these incidents – what does it **feel** like to hear Jesus speaking his words to **me now**? What does it feel like if we were saying these same things to someone else who is seeking **our** help, or **our** forgiveness? Can we speak them with sincerity?

Then, of course, there are all the other characters in the story – Peter, Simon of Cyrene, Pilate, one of the soldiers, one of the women, Jesus’ Mother, Mary. The richness of this story is immense – engagement, encounter.

I really do hope that ‘less will be More’ in the coming days!

### **Palm Sunday 2016**

At the Scripture Group meeting the other evening we read through the whole of St Luke’s account of the Passion. Each person took it in turn to read a paragraph and so many different voices were heard as the story unfolded. At the end of this prayerful reading one person commented that she had seen and heard things in the reading that she had not noticed before. Another person told us how he was a bit flummoxed when what he was reading was not always what he expected to come next. It is a very helpful exercise for all of us to do, either with another person or else by ourselves.

The thing is that we know this story. We really do, off by heart, or so we might think. In fact we know the basic

outline of what happens. All four of our Gospels give the same basic story, but each also has its own characteristics – an incident added here, a different word added there, sometimes a slightly different way of expressing the same thing. All of this adds to our overall understanding of who Jesus is, of what he has done for us, AND what is being asked of us in response to all of this. What we celebrate this week is not simply a spectacle to be gawked at and then we move on unaffected by it all. It is something that we are invited to take part in, to deepen our faith and our response to God's invitation.

When a deacon is ordained the bishop hands him a copy of the Gospels and says, "Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read. Teach what you believe. Practice what you teach." Now, to some degree – in our families, at work, in our neighbourhoods – we are all heralds of the Gospel of Christ. This week in particular we are invited to take this Gospel, to read it, to pray it, to believe it, AND to teach it by our way of life.

In order to do this please take home a copy of today's misalette. Read over St Luke's account of what happened. Pray over it, by reading it slowly, and if something leaps out from the page as strange, odd, or just a bit different, stay reflecting on this for a while. You could do this on the bus or the Metro, on getting up in the morning, before going to sleep at night, taking five minutes to read it while the kettle boils, and so on. Take and Read is our clear theme today.

### **Palm Sunday 2019**

All four of our Gospels agree on the basic structure of the events of Jesus' Passion and Death: there was a final supper around the time of the Jewish Passover; Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane; there was a trial before the Jewish Council and one before Pilate; the crowd wanted a criminal to be released rather than Jesus, but he is condemned anyway; he carried his Cross to Calvary, where he died between two criminals who were also being executed that same day; and then he was buried.

However, within each of the Gospels there are incidents recorded in one account but not the others, and this points both to perhaps different people recalling the events for each of the four Evangelists, and also to some of the key themes that each records throughout his account of Jesus' life. One of those key themes in St Luke's Gospel is the compassion and mercy of God. This is highlighted in his account of Jesus' Passion and Death in a number of ways but two in particular stand out in what we have just heard.

Even after the abuse Jesus had suffered at the hands of the soldiers, even after the humiliations, and while on his desperately painful journey carrying the Cross, even then the Jesus portrayed by Luke stops to talk and console a group of distraught women, "Daughter of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep rather for yourselves and for your children." Even on the road to his own death Jesus' concern centres on the needs, not of himself, but of others.

Then we have perhaps the most famous incident that people remember as Jesus is dying on the Cross; an incident recorded only here by St Luke. When one of the two criminals taunts Jesus, the other – whom we usually refer to as "The Repentant Thief" – rebukes him, turns to Jesus and pleads, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Even in his own dying moments Jesus can reply, "I promise you today you will be with me in paradise." God's mercy, embodied in the person of Jesus, shines out even on the Cross.

Each of these vignettes, these little incidents, is worthy of our pausing and reflecting on what they have to tell us today, but there is one aspect of the account that I would like to highlight now.

One of the people in our Scripture reflection group pointed this out to us as we read through the account of Jesus' Passion together the other night: the contrast between the atmosphere before Jesus' Death and after it. Before Jesus died the cruelty, the violence, the baying of the crowd, the torture, the agony, make for a febrile atmosphere. However, that atmosphere 'dies' with Jesus' own death.

Immediately after his death all is calm, quiet, reflective and sombre. Perhaps it is a call for all of us to reflect carefully on what all of these events mean to us in our own lives today... a task of our reflections in the coming week. You see, even in the turmoil that is our own lives, at times, it is this same compassionate Lord who comes to us offering light and hope in our own darkness.