

Lent 4: Mothering Sunday?

Joshua 5.9-12

2 Corinthians 5.17-21

Luke 15.1-3,11-32

‘this brother of yours was dead and has come to life.’

Even if I had wanted to say something about Mothering Sunday, the readings do not give me even the merest whiff of an opportunity. We have just heard three readings with not a single woman, not even a metaphorical mother in sight.

In fact, the readings could hardly be more male. We had the account of Joshua and the Israelites getting their first taste of the produce of the promised land. We are told that they encamped at a place that became known as Gilgal – from the Hebrew meaning to roll – for the Lord said to Joshua ‘Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.’ What we don’t get to hear is the immediately preceding activity, which puts another spin on the name Gilgal, and the whole idea of ‘rolling away disgrace.’ Joshua, it turns out, has been busy with the flint knives, circumcising all the males who had been born in the wilderness. It is even recorded that all the nation remained in the camp while they healed. I can only imagine the groaning. Definitely a male story.

And the gospel is all about a father and his two sons. What the mother thought of the return of her prodigal son is just not part of the story.

It seems that the lectionary is determined to stipulate that either you keep Mothering Sunday, or you don’t!

At a push one might try and spin something about the Israelites being weaned off the manna in the wilderness and onto the solid food of the promised land – but that really would be pushing it.

Clearly the strongest theme in today’s readings is that of reconciliation – the bringing back together of things which had been separated – the Israelites brought back to the land of Canaan, the prodigal son reconciled with his father - and Paul’s letter emphasises reconciliation as central to the mission of Jesus, and hence to the mission of the Church – as he writes; ‘God reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.’ We are called to bring together those things which have been separated; to address the divisions between individuals and nations; to restore people to a healthier relationship with the land, to this planet upon which we depend; and through all and above all to attend to that most fundamental of divisions – the alienation of the Creation from its Creator.

The Good News that we have to share with the world is that, as Paul says ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.’ It isn’t that we have to manufacture the

reconciliation between the Creator and Creation – God has revealed that reconciliation in the person of Jesus, and calls us to bear witness to it; to bear witness to the fact that no division, no matter how great or deep-seated or bitter, nothing is beyond God’s capability to reconcile. It is in the context of this faith that we can then engage in the work of reconciliation without falling, ultimately, into despair.

The work of reconciliation is rarely smooth, as the parable of the Prodigal Son reminds us. The elder son’s anger at the behaviour of his brother spills over into bitter resentment – ‘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!’ Where there are divisions, the effects on other people run wide and deep. People become invested in those divisions, and feel threatened when reconciliation comes – it changes the power structure, it may put us in a different place in the pecking order, it may require us to do some forgiving, to let go of some anger that we have held onto out of loyalty for someone else. We are inherently social creatures, and so reconciliation can never be just an individual event.

In the early days of the Church, so we understand, the reconciliation of a penitent was usually a public business, reflecting these social implications of any division. Confession was made before the assembled Church, and the proclamation of absolution was similarly public – the whole community needed to acknowledge that the reconciliation had been made. There could be no place for nursed resentments.

Even now, although the sacrament of reconciliation is usually exercised more privately, the priest is duty-bound to represent not just themselves, and their own views, but those of the whole Church – and the penitent confesses before Saints and angels and the whole company of heaven, if not before the whole company of the local Church militant. It is important that we remember the wider, social implications of any division if reconciliation is to be properly effected, rather than just being a matter of salving individual consciences. When we make our Confession, we can be thankful that we do not have to stand before all our brothers and sisters – what a terrifying prospect that would be - but that does not reduce our responsibility to one another, and our responsibility to seek reconciliation in that social context; it cannot be just a private transaction between me and my God.

There is a great deal of cynicism about reconciliation. So often we will just live with divisions, either because they don’t inconvenience us that much, or because to do anything about them would put us to too much trouble. There is also cynicism concerning divisions that appear insoluble – we talk about clashes of personality, as if that is a sufficient reason not to ever expect reconciliation. Divisions within our families, divisions within the Church on matters of human sexuality or the ministry of women, divisions between Israelis and Palestinians, between the west and the Islamic world, these and many other long-running, deep-seated divisions regularly provoke weary sighs and mutterings of irreconcilable differences. But, however wearying these divisions may be, our faith will not allow us to throw in the towel.

Jesus, in his very person, has shown us that no division, no matter how deep, how long-standing, how bitter is beyond hope. If Jesus has healed the fundamental alienation of the Creation from its Creator – if he has reconciled earth to heaven in the way the Scriptures and our Liturgies bear witness – then there can be no grounds for cynicism. Or at least, cynicism should always find its cure by a reminder of the Mission of God in Christ – that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.’

In the Mass we celebrate that reconciliation as we gather in this place; as we gather around the altar; the very throne of God and of the Lamb. Here we recall the atoning sacrifice – Christ who, by the Cross, offered his own flesh and blood, his own life to the Father. And we, whose flesh and blood are united in his by the sacraments, can offer ourselves, in Him, to the Father. We do this not because the Father demands this offering of our life from us, but because our life unreconciled to God, divided from the Creator, separated from the source of our life, cannot be properly lived. We offer our lives to the Creator, we seek reconciliation with Him in order to be fully, most truly alive. As the Father says to the elder son in the parable – this brother of yours was dead and has come to life.

Reconciliation, at the end of the day, is not an added extra – not the cherry on the cake – it is the essence of life. Where there is no reconciliation, life is diminished. The Scriptures proclaim and the Sacraments celebrate the reconciling work of God in Christ. We are called to lay down our weariness and cynicism at the divisions in our lives and in the world, and to be re-inspired with the vision of Christ, in whom heaven and earth are reconciled, in which the Creation is restored to life in its Creator; in which we too come to life in a way that even our own mothers would find astonishing.