

## **'Time of Change' in the Croydon Circuit**

### **Thoughts for Lent 2010**

**by Harvey, the Superintendent minister**

Sunday 14 March

Lent 4 Sons and mothers?

Guiding text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

- Introductory thoughts:

Our previous three Sundays have looked at:

1. Temptations, struggles and longings in the desert, and
2. the impact of dying for the Love for Jerusalem, and
3. stern warnings at times of stern situations.

Today, the Fourth Sunday in Lent, also Mothering Sunday (please note not Mother's Day, but Mothering Sunday), our guiding text is probably the most famous parable of Jesus known to the world. This parable unique to Luke is usually described as 'The Prodigal Son', but it concerns a number of people, not just one. It could equally be described as 'The Outraged Brother' or perhaps 'The Waiting Father'. And what a strange coincidence it is that the compilers of the Lectionary have chosen the story of 'The Waiting Father' on Mothering Sunday!

But once again, by way of introduction, can I ask how we can begin to relate our Bible material to the ongoing mission of the Church and Circuit to which we belong? Does 'The Prodigal Son' have something to say to the churches of Croydon?

Of course, the answer is 'Yes!', but we need to begin by asking something else of ourselves – 'with whom do I identify? Are we the wayward younger son? the angry older brother? the waiting father? a member of the revelling group of party-goers?'

St Ignatius of Loyola often invited people to identify with specific characters described in any given Bible text, and I am doing the same.

- First Pointer

*The strong desire to be independent.*

The younger son is keen to be set loose from his father's control. There is so much attraction to a life without anyone surrounding you with 'thou shalt not!' and 'thou shalt...!' [I still have ringing in my ears my mother's shout from upstairs at home as she put away the clean/ironed clothing in the airing cupboard (I was about 5 years of age at the time) – 'Harvey, whatever you're doing, stop it!]

How great it is to be free from our mother's apron strings, and see real freedom in terms of having no ties to anyone else, of total independence from everyone and everything!

How tempting it is to see our church-going and our spiritual development in the same way! I know how I want to worship God, I don't need anyone to tell me how to pray, how to worship, when to attend church – I am a truly independent Christian!

- Second Pointer

*Have we come to our senses?*

At one time the Prodigal probably revelled in his fine clothes bought with his father's inheritance money – the adulation he received from others, the luxury in which he indulged. But then, of course, he came to his senses ('he came to himself' RSV, Luke 15:17), realising that the life he considered as real freedom actually entailed total subjection to another man (the owner of the pigs). Perhaps he began to truly understand that the clothes on his back, all his possessions, his very life.....owed their origin to the father (and mother) from whom he had been so desperate to separate.

It is crucial for us, as individual Christians, to 'come to our senses' and recognise to whom we owe our lives, that without the fathering and mothering of God we can do nothing. Our worship is not something we choose to do, neither is it something over which we have control. Worship is a gift from God – we come to our senses when we accept it thankfully as a free gift.

- Third Pointer

*Everything we have comes from God – even our reason and our art.*

Everything we have and everything we are comes not from our own efforts but from God. When we live without that recognition, this great gift decays in our hands. Take our *reason*, for example. Our reason should be regarded as a supreme gift from our God who mothers us and fathers us. Descartes said 'I think, therefore I am' – how true, but we think because we have been given the gift of reason. Let's treat our thinking capacity with thankfulness! We must never pit our reasoning powers against our religious nature in the way some would have us see religion and science in total opposition. After all, we are called to love God with our mind, as much as with our heart, our soul and our strength.

And then, what about our *art*? Artistic creativity can so easily become controlled by our modern interest in promoting a celebrity culture or our incessant desire to make art into an entertainment commodity! Let's come to our senses and elevate human artistic ability - in poetry, music, art, architecture - as wonderful vehicles leading us to the glory and beauty of God. Can I ask a sensitive question? - How do we view the architecture of our church buildings? Do we see them as merely as useful functional places, or do we look for a sense of art and beauty in them? Our buildings are great luxuries, and great expressions of God's gift to us. Too often Christian people have squandered their buildings, made use of them and manipulated them – instead we should come to our senses and treasure them as expressions of God's mothering and fathering generosity.

- Fourth Pointer

*The older brother – who is he?*

It is important to consider the Older Brother as being equally significant as the Prodigal Son. It is often assumed that the Older Brother should be associated with the Pharisees of Jesus' time. This could well be so; but are we not the Older Brother too? Could it be that the churches of the Croydon Circuit are perceived in just this way?

In the parable he is a good person, he is faithful and obedient to God and he does not live 'dangerously'. Sadly, however, he disassociates himself from his wayward, but returned brother – note v.30 'When this son of *yours* came...' It is worth asking if people outside the Church community think we are like that. We know, of course, we have received the gracious love of God, we try to be faithful believers and we know we must live moral and upright lives. But we too also have a tendency to disassociate ourselves from those who live and act 'dangerously' – how easy it is for us to pour scorn on Richard Dawkins (the author of 'The God Delusion') and other 'enemies' of God! Remember how the Church demonised Charles Darwin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with his 'wicked' theory of evolution! Such attitudes still abound.

But we are loved just as much by God. The thing which is so difficult for us is the recognition that God is longing to receive and welcome those 'dangerous' 'wicked' enemies just as much as he cares for us.

The response of the Waiting Father helps us to see that one can never understand a conversion 'from the outside'. Perhaps we are being prompted to see everyone as 'insiders'. The word 'outsider' surely cannot exist in any Christian vocabulary.

- Concluding comments

It may be worth trying to get inside the 'skin' of a loving parent, a mother or a father, as we try to grasp the message of this world-famous parable. A parent often gives everything for their child, never stops loving her, does everything he demands of her, waits for him and longs for her to come to her senses, and becomes the first to celebrate such love.

Let's restore something of such a love in the churches of our Circuit on this Mothering Sunday!

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