

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT ~ 27 March 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Two meals shared on coming home – two meals shared after a long, pain-filled journey – two meals shared to celebrate a new beginning. Today's Liturgy of the Word begins and ends with the two meals, among the best-known stories of the whole Bible: the Passover meal and the parable of the Prodigal Son.



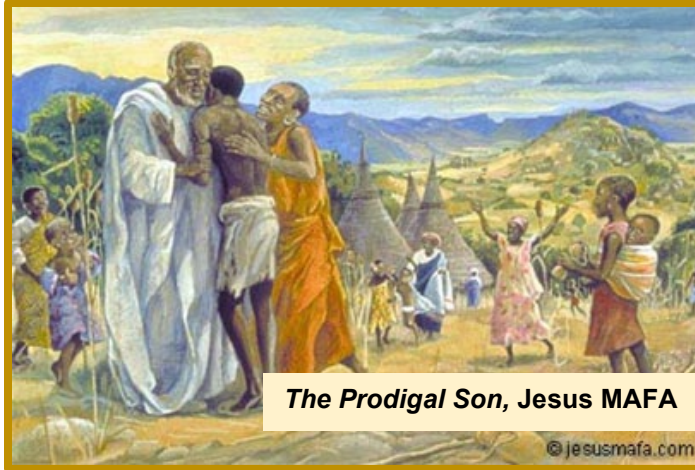
The first Passover was celebrated in Egypt just before God saved the Hebrews from slavery and oppression. Called to do so by the compassionate God, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam led the people through the wilderness for forty years. The second Passover is celebrated when the people, now led by Joshua, cross the Jordan River and come into the Promised Land, “a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing” (Deut 8:7-9). During the years in the desert, they had been eating manna, but from now on, beginning with the celebration of Passover, they will eat the produce of the land (Josh 5:11). Their time of wandering in the wilderness has ended. They have finally come home to the place where they will become one people, the people of Israel.

Despite the richness of the description of the land in Deuteronomy, at this Passover the people eat “unleavened cakes and parched grain” (Josh 5:10). This is an important reminder to us about the “theology of enough,” about meals as places of welcome and community and as moments of sharing with those who have less than we have. In Rabbi Ellen Bernstein's words, “Passover is the path back to basics – the earth, the wheat, and water – and our essential selves. Passover teaches that freedom comes when we rid ourselves of the burden of too much. The telling of our story begins with wide-open arms. The Seder bids us to invite those who are hungry to partake of our meal. It also bids us to invite those who are hungry in spirit – lonely, lost, heartsick. We bring everybody into the circle, regardless of gender, sexuality, race, age, and religion. The freedom we aspire to depends on our sharing.”

The first meal – the Passover – is part of our story as a Christian community. It marks the Exodus, the most significant moment in the Old Testament when God becomes the God of the Israelites and brings them into the Promised Land. Not only the actual event of the Exodus but the telling of the story over and over becomes the sign of God's living presence among us. In the Christian tradition, the Passover becomes the model on which our founding story is shaped – the event of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ and the telling of that story over and over, ensuring us that the Risen One continues to rejoice with us and to suffer with us, to be God-with-us.



The meal in the story of the prodigal son is also a celebration of coming home after a long and pain-filled journey with the promise of a new beginning.



There is an irony in the title, *prodigal son*, which is not in the biblical story but has been given the parable over time. The son is prodigal because he wastes his inheritance in a recklessly extravagant way. The father is prodigal because he forgives and welcomes home the lost son in a recklessly extravagant way, giving him a kiss (a sign of forgiveness), a robe (a mark of distinction), a signet ring (a sign of authority), and sandals (footwear for his new journey). The father prepares for him a banquet with music and dancing,

sharing the joy of his return with the household and the community. The father also reaches out to the self-righteous older son in an equally recklessly extravagant way, missing him from the table, going out to him when he refuses to come in, calling him “son,” and assuring this son of his place in the father’s heart and home.

Unlike the Passover meal, the meal in the story of the prodigal son is unfinished. Like parables generally, this parable calls us to look deeper and listen more carefully. We do not know if the older son comes back to the table, recognizing his own failures and being grateful for the depth of his father’s compassion and love for him as much as for his younger brother. Only then will that family’s reconciliation be complete. Only then will the father be able to rejoice fully.

And we do not know if there are daughters or where the mother is. We can only imagine the mother’s suffering and pain when her younger son goes away to live such an irresponsible life and her older son remains home, resentful and unhappy. How often she must have looked down the road in hope of seeing him come home! How often she must have spoken to the older son in hope of his becoming a loving member of the family once more! How she must have prayed for reconciliation within her family!

Let us reflect on the mother’s hidden place in this story with this poem by an unknown author:

Where is the mother of the prodigal son
On that day so long ago?
What were her thoughts
And what were her fears
As she watched him turn to go?



The Return of the Prodigal Son
Pompeo Batoni

How many times in the dark of night
Did the tears slide down her face?
Did she get out of bed
And fall on her knees,
Just to pray that her boy was safe?

How were the days when she did not know
Was he alive? Was he warm? Was he well?
Who were his friends?
And where did he sleep?
Was there anyone there she could tell?

But, oh, on that day when she looked down the
road
As she had looked since her son went away,
Did love unspeakable flood her soul?
Did she cry?
What did she say?

I think when the father had welcomed their son
And the boy had greeted his brother,
That the servants made a path
For him to enter the door
And the waiting arms of his mother.

This week, I invite you to recall a meal that has a special place in your memory, a meal that somehow marked your life with welcome, community and “holy enough.” It may have been a time with family, an anniversary celebration with community, a moment of coming home, the end of a painful period in your life’s journey, your first meeting with someone who is now precious in your life. Take time to thank God for all the meals which have nourished you – physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Thank God for Earth whose fruits have given you these meals. Thank all those whose work has produced the meals for you.



The Prodigal Son
George Pemba