

4th SUNDAY OF LENT YEAR C HOMILY 2022
FORGIVENESS, MERCY AND LOVE FOR THE LOST WHO ARE FOUND
Lk 15.1-3, 11-32 Josh 5.9-12 2 Cor 5.17-21

There's nothing new here, in a sense, as we've heard this parable so often before. Yet, it is at the heart of Jesus' emphatic teaching on mercy and forgiveness, in contrast to the self-righteous and judgemental Pharisees, many of whom seemed to enjoy lording it over the ordinary people, the *riff-raff*, and giving them a hard time, because of their sense of superiority as they saw it.

Earlier this month, I attended the funeral of Father Kevin Mogg, (at 88 and 65 years a priest), who had been seminary rector for much of my (and my predecessor here, Bill Attard's) time at Corpus Christi College in Clayton, from 1973 to 1978. In 1979, when I was appointed as assistant priest at Croydon, he went as parish priest to North Ringwood, where he remained for 20 years before moving to Mornington as PP until he retired. Ordained in 1956, he had started off as curate in West Heidelberg, and then worked in juvenile justice ministry full-time, perhaps good preparation for seminary training! He was also later episcopal vicar for social welfare and established Catholic Social services in Victoria. He did have more than a passing interest in the horses too! Like us all, he had his flaws, but in the balance, his lived faith stood out all the way. After his reluctant retirement at 80, he continued with prison ministry until mobility issues became too much for him.

Why I refer to him today is because it was the first time I had heard today's Gospel used for a funeral Mass. Sister Cathy Meese RSC, who continues to do prison ministry, mentioned to me that an inmate, on hearing of Kevin's death, wanted to know where he was buried, as, on his imminent release, he wished to pay tribute by visiting his grave. Since he was cremated, I couldn't give an answer, but sent a copy of the funeral booklet. This man had been very much touched by Kevin's pastoral care and interest in him, giving him hope for his future; he is resolved to live a better and more peaceful life on his release, after a very difficult past. This made me more aware of why the *Prodigal Son* was chosen as the Gospel for Kevin's farewell.

Of course, the parable is more than just about a very naughty boy who runs away and blows the dough, so to speak. Certainly, he does the wrong thing, and is totally self-focussed until the hard times hit, and he wakes up to himself, in with the pigs and the swill and the dirt, the ritual uncleanness symbolic of the depths to which he had descended. The good times couldn't last, and facing reality for him hit hard, as his hunger, poverty and isolation and loneliness, then desperation, overwhelmed him. He is more than prepared to return home in a different role, as a servant, but his father's joy is palpable and real. He starts off sorry for himself, but then realizes the need to express his remorse to his father.

It's a bit of a family story, about let-downs and disappointments, with relationships breaking down and forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation required, but the standout here is the forgiving father, perhaps foolish for giving his wayward son the opportunity to go his own sinful way, but then acknowledging the freedom of personal responsibility, or more likely, irresponsibility, in this case. Most significant is the way in which, in undignified fashion, he is portrayed as running towards his lost, but returning son, before any words of repentance are uttered.

Rembrandt's famous portrayal of the scene fills in the gap of the missing mother, with the father's welcoming and embracing arms reflective of the feminine element, with one strong, hairy arm and the other soft and gentle, when one looks closely.

The Jerome Biblical Commentary notes that this passage on mercy is *suffused with joy*, and also relief, as the wild and wayward one returns in sorrow and humility, and ultimately, no doubt, gratitude.

We can't help feeling some identification with, and sympathy for, big brother, who has dutifully done all the right things, out of obedience and respect for his father, maybe even fear? His indignation is understandable in saying *it's just not fair*, but then life can be like that, can't it? For us, it's probably easier to relate to this attitude, but Jesus' words are a reminder that self-righteousness can blind us to the necessity for forgiveness and another chance to be given to the sinner. The open question to conclude with is whether big brother does finally come. His opportunity for a change of heart is there, and he can then share in the joy and happiness of the welcome back celebration. We know he should, difficult though it might be, moreso perhaps in families, where hurts can be deep, and yet letting go of them is a healthy and right response! And we're all the better for it too.

Once again, God's love and mercy is to the fore, if only we reach out and acknowledge it for ourselves and others, and apply it in our own lives.

And now, we have a further reminder to contribute to Project Compassion, supporting the work of Caritas Australia. This weekend we hear from Rosalie, a former child soldier, but now a community leader in the Democratic Republic of Congo, helping other former combatants to return to civilian life. (Caritas video).

john hannon

28th March 2022