

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 34 (33); 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3,11-32

We had to celebrate!

Lk. 15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3 So he told them this parable:

11 “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I

am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31 Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

For brevity’s sake, the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin have been omitted. The parable of the lost sheep is

Thought for the day

Both sons have misconstrued the relationship with their father. The older son wants to relate on a basis of servile loyalty (allegorically, the Law). The younger son, on his return, wishes to relate on the basis of confession of sin and desires to be treated as a slave. The father rejects both projections. Servile loyalty and guilt are not unknown in the Christian tradition!

Prayer

Abba, Father, show us your compassion and let us know your love. Amen.

also in Mt 18:12-14. The Lost Coin and the Lost Son are unique to Luke.

KIND OF WRITING

Our reading is a parable. As such, it is meant to destabilise the hearers and put them “in crisis”, literally in the “critical” position of having to make a judgement (= *krisis* in Greek). In its context here, it is also incipiently allegorical – the father could be God, the faithful son, the Pharisees, the prodigal son, the tax-collectors and sinners and so forth).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) The big background here is in the book of Genesis. If you look at the stories of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Manasseh and Ephraim, in each case, the second child is preferred by God to the first. Israelites told themselves such stories because they felt themselves to be the “second sons” within the social and political world of the ancient Near East, unexpectedly elevated to the status of first-born by God’s gracious election.

(ii) Many OT texts reflect on God’s gracious compassion, for example:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. (Micah 7:18)

LENT 4	Josh 5:9-11	Joshua	Home-coming and feasting (Passover)
Joshua	Ps 33	Thanksgiving and anguish	Taste and see, compassion
	2 Cor 5:17-21	New creation in Christ	Reconciliation (in two senses)
	Lk 15:1-3, 11-32	Prodigal son and merciful father	Compassion, home-coming reconciliation and feasting.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Within Luke, there is a tendency to use disreputable people to illustrate the Good News, to the discomfort of the officially religious: Zacchaeus, the unjust steward, the good thief, the shepherd (proverbially unable to keep the Law) and the (mean?) woman of the lost coin, the prodigal son. All these stories are unique to Luke. God writes straight with crooked lines!

(ii) God's choosing of the Israelites/Jews and the extension of his election to Gentiles are the issues in the parable. Paul reflects on these issues in Romans 9-11.

ST PAUL

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Galatians 4:6-7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 1-3 God's compassion to all without discrimination is the Good News, then and now. This context helps greatly in reading the parable.

Verses 11-12 We are told of two sons at the start; both are sons. The younger son tactfully omits the rest of his sentence, "when you flake out"! Heirs were entitled to use the family capital to make money, but not to alienate it. The young son is, as a result, no longer legally a son.

Verse 13 The younger son's decline is briefly told, without detail. (The older brother's "prostitutes" are his problem.)

Verse 14 Famine is frequent in this period; it speeds up the degradation of the son. However, the son does not turn to the network of Jewish charity in the diaspora available to fellow Israelites in need. He has cut himself off *ethnically*.

Verses 15-16 Pigs are unclean and forbidden in Judaism. Finally, the younger son has cut himself off *religiously*. His isolation is complete. In need, he loses even the capacity to take basic initiatives.

Verses 17-18 Literally in Greek: *he came to himself*, a favourite line of St Augustine of Hippo. The Greek of v. 17b is different: "on account of this famine, I am lost." The son prepares his speech carefully—thus betraying his anxiety.

Verse 19 He has indeed lost his rights as a son, both religiously and legally.

Verse 20 The father has been looking out for him, all along! One of the shocks of the parable is this authority figure—the *paterfamilias*—setting aside his dignity and running. Compassion: this unusual, feminine word is used elsewhere twelve times in the NT: eight times of Jesus (Matt 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 20:34; Mk 1:41, 6:34, 8:2, 9:22; Lk 7:13) and twice of God (18:27; 15:20) in parables, and once of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:33).

Verse 21 The prepared speech is interrupted (a careful reader should register this in the proclamation).

Verses 22-23 The robe, ring and sandals symbolise full restoration (the ring is a signet ring, slaves do not wear sandals). The fatted calf was being kept for some special occasion. What could be more special?

Verse 24 Legally the son had absolved the father of all responsibility towards his son and in that sense the son really was dead to the father. The lost and found language links the parable to the lost sheep and lost coin.

Verse 25 At last, the older son comes on scene. We travel with him and hear the noise from a distance. The Greek word is *symphōnia*, that is, some kind of music making, a band or orchestra.

Verses 26-27 It is revealing that this son calls on a slave to enquire – does he feel more at home with the slaves in the household? The slave echoes the father's words.

Verse 28 The reaction is a natural one. Again, the father's coming out to him is culturally a shock.

Verses 29-30 Fidelity or servility? Rather nastily, the older sibling pre-

sumes details unknown to him. Notice the avoidance of the word "brother."

Verse 31 From what we know of the father, this is true. In the context in Luke, the Scribes and the Pharisees are being invited not to limit God's generosity to the expected "locations" of grace! Cf. the book of Jonah.

Verse 32 The father, however, uses the word brother. The next step is not to be found within the parable but in life itself.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Like many a parable, this story makes its point in what seems to be unfair: the spendthrift son is rewarded and the elder son is hurt and angry. Jesus is telling us that love is a free gift, not something we earn by our goodness. This is true of human love, and is also true of God's love. When have you experienced this truth in the love you have received from others? When has the experience of human love prompted you to reflect on God's love for you?

2. After some time the younger son "came to himself" and returned home. Where and when have you experienced a homecoming after a time of exile and alienation? What helped you to come to yourself and make that journey home?

3. The older son resented the welcome given to the younger son after his wandering and dissolute life. This contrasts with the welcome the father gave the younger son. Perhaps you have experienced these differing attitudes in yourself. What were they like for you? Where was there life for you or for others?

PRAYER

God of compassion, you await the sinner's return and spread a feast to welcome home the lost.

Save us from the temptations that lead us away from you, and draw us back by the constancy of your love, that we may take our place in your household and gladly share our inheritance with others. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lent 1	Deuteronomy 26:4-10	Creed	Ps 91 (90)	Roman 10:8-13	Luke 4:1-13
Lent 2	Genesis 15:5-12,17-18	Covenant	Ps 27 (26)	Philippians 3:17-4:1	Luke 9:28-36
Lent 3	Exodus 3:1-8,13-15	Burning bush	Ps 103 (102)	1 Cor 10:1-6,10-12	Luke 13:1-9
Lent 4	Joshua 5:9-12	First Passover	Ps 34 (33)	2 Cor 5:17-21	Lk 15:1-3,11-32
Lent 5	Isaiah 43:16-21	A new deed	Ps 126 (125)	Philippians 3:8-14	John 8:1-11

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!

2 Cor 5:14 *For the love of Christ controls us, since we have concluded this, that Christ died for all; therefore all have died.* 15 *And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised.* 16 *So then from now on we acknowledge no one from an outward human point of view. Even though we have known Christ from such a human point of view, now we do not know him in that way any longer.*

2 Cor 5:17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is a justly famous passage, even with all its difficulties. It does reflect a particular context in Paul's relationships with the Corinthians. Some kind of breakdown has occurred with at least some of the believers in that city. Paul is trying once more to rebuild relations, to restore communion, to promote reconciliation and, not least, to remind them of his own authority and ministry.

KIND OF WRITING

Our reading is an appeal: Paul wants the Corinthians to become what they already are in Christ.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

2 Corinthians has a complicated history and may have been written in stages, collected later into one document.

Greeting (1:1-2)

Thanksgiving (1:3-11)

Body (1:12-13:10)

1. Paul defends his change of travel plans (1:12-2:13)
2. Paul defends his apostolic authority (2: 14-7:16)
3. The collection for Jerusalem (8:1-

9:15)

4. Paul defends himself and denounces the opponents (10:1-13:10)

Closing greetings (13:11-13)

Our reading comes from the second argument, in which Paul is defending his apostolic authority. A fuller context is given by vv. 14-16, as a lead-in.

RELATED PASSAGES

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. (2Corinthians 4:1-2)

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed—namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed. This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus' faithfulness. (Romans 3:21-26 NET)

But may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that matters is a new creation! (Galatians 6:14-15 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

In these verses, Paul is writing in a very compact way—almost telegraphese—and these paragraphs are “fraught with background,” in Auerbach's marvellous phrase.

Verse 14a It is hard to get away from compel or control, but the range of meanings of the verb is: to hold together, to enclose; to hold prisoner; to seize, to

press hard, to dominate. We may translate: we are claimed by the love of Christ.

Verses 14b-15 Jesus died for us, that is, not *in our stead* but *for our benefit*. The sequence is unexpected: *therefore all have died*. Cf. Rom 6:8. Jesus' death has given birth to a new way of being, a new creation.

Verse 16 As a result, our whole way of looking at reality and others is utterly changed, to match our new reality.

Verse 17 New creation: cf. Gal 6:15. The idea of a new creation was part of apocalyptic cosmology; here it means the objective achievement of Christ.

Verses 18-19 Again, Paul does not anticipate the Anselmian doctrine of propitiation. It is not that Christ paid a price and thus reconciled an angry God, but rather that Jesus reconciled a sinful world to God. In Paul's phrase, “all this is from God,” who *through* Christ was reconciling the world *to* himself. Cf. Romans 3:21-26 on this page.

Verse 20 It is, alas, possible for us to ignore God's achievement in Christ and not practice reconciliation. Paul preaches a more consistent living out of the reconciliation we have received.

Verse 21 Paul is pithy to the point of obscurity. For background see Gal 3:6-14 in the NET translation. Such conciseness perhaps points to a creedal formula such as 2 Cor 8:9 or and Phil 2:5-11. The somewhat problematic “made to be sin” indicates either the incarnation (Jesus shared our broken humanity) or to the crucifixion (understood as God's curse; see Gal 3:13). Paul does think of Jesus' death as a sacrifice, but not a propitiatory one. Rather, it is a communion sacrifice, in which God's mercy is disclosed through Jesus' costly and compassionate solidarity with us all.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Letting go of familiar ways of looking at reality can be really difficult, even in the faith. Has this been your experience?

2. To be a minister of reconciliation is the calling of all Christians without distinction. Where am I called?

PRAYER

God of all faithfulness, through Christ, you have entered into our dark and broken world. As you have reconciled us with yourself, help us to be bearers of reconciliation in our turn.

The First Passover in the Land

Josh. 5:9 The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

Josh. 5:10 While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. 11 On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. 12 The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Following on the story of the burning bush, the lectionary now takes us to the conclusion of the Exodus, the entry into the promised land under Joshua.

KIND OF WRITING

Archaeological evidence has undermined the historicity of the entry into the land (Jericho was not occupied; Ai was abandoned; no change of pottery and so forth). In response, scholars have taken up different positions.

- The story is still broadly reliable even if the details are not.
- Some pastoral nomads peacefully infiltrated the land.
- The Israelites were originally native Canaanites, who, galvanised by their faith in YWHW, rose against their Canaanite overlords.
- Joshua and related books are post-exilic legends, of no historical value.

A summary from *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* may help.

Nonetheless, all but the most conservative biblical scholars do agree that Joshua is not history in the sense of an account of what actually happened. Rather, it may be thought of as history in the sense of a people's repeated efforts to draw on its remembered past in order to understand and shape its present.

It is, at the same time, a text which deals with transition — an entry point (!) for contemporary reflection.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Joshua completes the story

of the Pentateuch by narrating the entry into the land (Joshua 1-12) and the allotting of the tribal areas (Joshua 13-21).

- Introduction
- Conquest
- Allotment

Chapter 5 recounts the ritual preparation for holy war, in the course of which, God gives instructions about the transition between the time of wandering and the time of settlement.

RELATED PASSAGES

The preceding verses read:

At that time the LORD said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time.” So Joshua made flint knives, and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath-haaraloth. This is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the warriors, had died during the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt. Although all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people born on the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For the Israelites travelled forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the warriors who came out of Egypt, perished, not having listened to the voice of the LORD. To them the Lord swore that he would not let them see the land that he had sworn to their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way. When the circumcising of all the nation was done, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. (Joshua 5:2-8)

For a later justification of the entry into the land, see the book of Wisdom:

Those who lived long ago in your holy land you hated for their detestable practices, their works of sorcery and unholy rites, their merciless slaughter of children, and their sacrificial feasting on human flesh and blood. These initiates from the midst of a heathen cult, these parents who murder helpless lives, you willed to destroy by the hands of our ancestors, so that the land most precious of all to you might receive a worthy colony of the servants of God. (Wisdom 12:3-7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 9 The verb “roll away” in Hebrew is *galal*, hence the pun (in folk etymology) on the place name Gilgal. The disgrace could be either the enslavement or the lack of circumcision during the time of wandering (see the preceding verses).

Verse 10 This makes an important narrative parallel with the very first Passover in Egypt, in Exodus 12.

Verse 11 As promised, the produce of the land is now theirs. Again, the link with Ex 12:17-20 is made. Parched grain is added to the expected unleavened cakes in anticipation of the “produce of the land”. Cf. *You shall eat no bread or parched grain or fresh ears until that very day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your settlements.* (Leviticus 23:14) The fourteen days may refer to a period of recovery from the circumcision narrated in Josh 5:2-7. The full moon on the 14 Nisan still marks the Passover (Exod 12:2, 6; Lev 23:5; Ezek 45:21).

Verse 12 The manna was the food of wandering and its cessation marks the beginning of settled, agrarian life.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The great story from Exodus to Entry was written to give people hope in the present. In your own experience, have you drawn on the past to help you live in hope in the present?

2. Our passage today is a story of transition, a story of letting go of previous props and the taking up of new practices in a new situation. Such transition challenges us as individuals and as members of the Church. Do any particular issues come to mind?

3. The sense of homecoming and safe arrival after wandering is palpable and may speak to our own experience of wandering, both literal and metaphorical.

PRAYER

God of all our journeyings, we know you are with us always, in our going out and coming in. Help us discern what we need to let go of that we may travel lightly and with agility. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 34 (33); 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3,11-32

READINGS 1 AND 3

Home-coming and festival join our two readings together, in a remarkable way.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 34 (33) makes an excellent response because it takes up two themes: (i) delivery and (ii) nourishment. This is a wisdom psalm, drawing lessons from experience for others. Cf. *Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.* (Psalms 34:11) The sudden invitation to “taste and see” is startling in its sensory concreteness—suggesting the help of God was immediate and it triggered delight. To taste (as in English) can also mean to try out.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Joshua 5:9-12

All transition is difficult, eliciting choice and change. The entry into the land marked a major transition from nomadic to settled living.

Second reading

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Our reading today balances nicely between the first reading and the Gospel. Like the first reading, new realities call for new practices. Like the Gospel, reconciliation stands at the centre of Christ’s mission *and ours*.

Gospel

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

See if you can listen in a fresh way to this great parable by noticing that the story is unresolved at the end and by asking yourself why Luke leaves it open-ended like that.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 31 March

Isaiah 65:17-21

Exultant optimism is perhaps not the mood of the times, but, it is the mood of this passage from Isaiah. One line anticipates the Gospel: *no more will be found the infant living a few days only*. Even the exaggerations are delightful.

John 4:43-54

John’s Gospel tells this familiar story with an intriguing twist: the parent is first called a “court official,” then a “man” and only towards the end, “the father.” For us all, some roles are more fundamental than others.

Tuesday 1 April

Ezekiel 47:1-9,12

“Awash with life” might be a good description of Ezekiel’s “vision” of the Temple. Exuberance is everywhere: *And their fruit will be good to eat and the leaves medicinal*. The Gospel takes up the water image in a remarkable vision of healing.

John 5:1-3,5-16

As you listen to this story, you might bear in mind the corresponding one about about the man born blind in John 9. Both “patients” are put under enormous pressure. Under that pressure, the man born blind becomes stronger; in this Gospel, the man crumbles and betrays Jesus. What does being under pressure for the faith do to me?

Wednesday 2 April

The discourse in John 5—read today and tomorrow—reflects later robust “dialogue” with the synagogue. John 5 rehearses no fewer than five arguments in the case for Jesus being the Messiah. The outline is:

The miracle: 5:1-9

The Dispute: 5:10-47

The investigation: 5:10-15

The attack: 5:16-19

The five witnesses: 5:17-47

The witnesses are (1) God in 5:16-30; (2) John the Baptist in 5:31-35; (3) Jesus’ deeds in 5:36-38; (4) the Scriptures in 5:39-40; (5) Moses in 5:45-47.

As in all the discourses of this Gospel, we are not hearing the actual words of the historical Jesus. Instead, after decades of reflection, we hear the deep spirituality of the great evangelist.

Isaiah 49:8-15

The feeling of being abandoned led the prophet to affirm that God, like a mother to us, never *ever* forgets her people.

John 5:17-30

Part of the background to the opening verses is a contemporary Jewish discussion about whether God *could* really have ceased from creating, as it says in Gen 2:2. Part of the foreground is an anticipation of the raising of Lazarus, who will “hear his voice and live.”

Thursday 3 April

Exodus 32:7-14

In this disconcerting story, God is furious that the people have so quickly abandoned him. Moses reminds God of who God is and so God relents, thanks be to God.

John 5:31-47

This compact reading can upset us today because of the robust comments of Jesus. In reality, we are eavesdropping on the later conversation between Christian and Jews. The evangelist parades before us five “witnesses” to Jesus: the Father, John the Baptist, his own deeds, the Scriptures and, finally, Moses himself. The reading calls us all to give an account of the hope that is within us.

Friday 4 April

Wisdom 2:1,12-22

There is a contemporary ring to this reading from the book of Wisdom: the godless resent the faith of the believers. Such resentment foreshadows the reaction to Jesus.

John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Jesus certainly disconcerted those who met him, as we hear in this reading. Who is he really? Where is he from? Who sent him?

Saturday 5 April

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Jeremiah, always in difficulty because of his calling, places his full and total trust in God. The psalm captures it well: *Lord God, I take refuge in you*.

John 7:40-52

Again, there is a contemporary ring about the range of opinions and the discord triggered by the person and presence of Jesus. What do I believe? What difference does it make?