

### *The hour of banquet and of song*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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*Joshua 5:2-12; Ps 32; 2 Cor 5:16-21; Lk 15:11-32*

These readings are about relationship. They are not easy readings, but then Lent is not an easy season. As a deacon, [if I ever work properly as a deacon], my work is with people whose relationship with god isn't through the church. I should be outside the church for most of my work. That then makes my own relationship with God and church somewhat difficult. Being with people for whom the church is toxic and sometimes even deadly raises questions about my own relationship with the church.

I find I have to continually be aware of such questions. Perhaps instead my ministry is *from* the community to the church, and then — ... I get readings like today's to work on!

Circumcision was a sign of a people's relationship with their god, and a necessary sign if one was to eat Passover. Maybe that was why the Priestly writer added this story about the warriors being circumcised before the people celebrated the first Passover in the Promised Land.

Usually, for Israel, it was infant circumcision, on the 8th day. Circumcision itself didn't distinguish them from other Semitic people around them or even the Egyptians. Infant circumcision was different. But the Babylonians, met later on, didn't circumcise, neither did the Greeks. (so Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, in a Greek society, had to rethink what to do about this sign of covenant.)

The covenant relationship that this is a sign of was dramatically told in the reading from Genesis two weeks ago. Do you remember that Abram had to slaughter a heifer, a goat and a ram..., and cut them in two and then with birds to form them into two lines.

This Ancient Near East form of contract meant that the two parties walked together through the slaughter, and said: "If I break this contract, may I be like these animals." Did it ever happen? We don't know. But I did hear of something similarly bloodthirsty happening to Greeks who were made bankrupt.

There should be two parties walking through the slaughter: but Abram fell into a deep sleep: Only a smoking firepot and a flame went through. God took on the terms of the covenant, not Abram.

Is this what Paul is referring to when he says "Christ was made sin for us? Is this god taking on the consequences of a broken covenant?"

I have heard something similar from a friend of mine, a Brisbane biblical scholar, Michael Carden, that in Jewish mystical tradition, there is the notion that when god created the universe this act caused a shattering of the divine fabric. ... Divine sparks are trapped within all of creation, godself is split apart, god is in exile from godself and must be restored to fullness...

Sin is about separation and breaking of relationship, and the Hebrew enacted this separation, this cutting off, by cutting off some skin. Bearing the marks in their own body. (the males).

Did I say that religion can be toxic?

[I heard at a conference on Homophobia recently: “religion is like a snake, if you want to catch it you need to know what you are doing, otherwise it will turn and bite you!” Buddha said that.]

In the Corinthians reading though, Paul writes: in Christ ... “we might become the righteousness of god.” Righteousness is also about relationship. Justice and righteousness go hand in hand in the Old Testament. Two words that belong totally together. Not Law and Order (loranorda). This passage in Corinthians can be seen as the distillation of Paul’s theology. But it is best explained by a story, a story which can be seen as the distillation of Luke’s gospel, a story of two sons and a father. [Here I am indebted to a scholarly work on the Palestinian background to the parables.]

Both sons broke the relationship with their father. Both wished him dead in one way or another. The younger one, in saying he wanted his inheritance, the elder, by behaving as a slave and not saying what was in his heart. The village, looking on, would have cut the youngster off totally. Sacred Rabbinic commands were violated in what he asked. It is not done. And the elder likewise humiliated his father in front of everyone. It is not done!

The father acceded to the younger brother’s request, (not by dying), and the boy consequently disposed of his wealth and then lost it in a far (a gentile) land. He was brought so low, that he hatched a plan for his own salvation that would cost him dearly. He would live in the village, in the face of all the scorn, and work as a hired hand. But his father shattered almost all of his plan.

The prodigal struggled back to the village and the father somehow knew. He caught sight of him in the distance and he ran! Flowing robes, flapping around his knees, he ran right through the village. The father makes a total spectacle of himself. Totally undignified! He draws to himself the mockery and scorn of the village that would otherwise have been focused on the son. And again and again the father gives the kiss of reconciliation and forgiveness. Shattered by all of this the boy can only say his prepared confession of sin. His own ideas of how he might save himself have simply vanished. The father reinstates him in the household, with the robe, the ring and the shoes all signifying authority. And the fatted calf means that everyone will feast! The village is placated.

Usually so boring, the village is abuzz with clapping and music; confusion reigns as the celebrations begin! The elder son refuses to enter into the house and again the father humiliates himself by going out to him. The elder son has also broken the relationship. He has worked like a slave, not like a son. He refuses to enter the house and to join the festivities. it is not done! This is unheard of behaviour.

The father again pleads with his child, this elder son. He again tells the son who he is and what he has. And that it is his brother who has returned. He pleads for the relationships to be healed. He humiliates himself by pleading for reconciliation.

And there the story stops. The ending has to be provided by the listener. The reconciliation comes from the father. The father is humiliated for his children

Jesus is made sin for us, the godhead is shattered. ...broken things for broken people...

Time and time again, god pleads with us to respond, to become the righteousness of god, to be the people of god, a messianic people, to raise up the divine in that which is despised and rejected, and to make sacred that which is unclean [*holy things for holy people*]

...the things of god for the people of god...

So let us join the buzz and confusion of the village as we prepare to join in the eucharistic feast and to celebrate that all things are made new...

*...this is the hour of banquet and of song...*