

Fourth Sunday in Lent - 2019

The Book of Joshua is problematic on many levels. It is a book about boundaries. Boundaries define and demarcate, as a metaphor they reveal a concern with issues of identity. The issue for the Book of Joshua is what is it that makes Israel unique, what defines Israel's identity? These are live issues in our day, identity politics are used to define who we are and of course who we are not! But identity is not a dirty word, the problem arises when we use matters of identity to make claims about who are, and who are not the people of God. The Book of Joshua despite its difficulties shouldn't be shunned, it should perhaps be required reading in an age such as ours. It holds up a mirror perhaps to those of us who regard themselves as people of God; what do we see? This is a really important question as we engage today in perhaps one of Jesus' most well-known parables.

Today is Laetare Sunday or refreshment Sunday. The introit in days gone by would have begun 'Rejoice,' Laetare. The Church is reminding us that our Easter festivities are drawing ever closer. In the old country it is Mothering Sunday a day when mothers are honoured. In days gone by families were reunited, children who worked as domestic servants, or as apprentices away from home would have the opportunity to take the day off to join their family and see their mothers. Some folk would visit their Cathedral or 'mother church,' to give honour and thanks to the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of God. These of course, were days when rigid boundaries of class, education, gender and wealth were an ever present reality. Once again churches in Canberra like ours are displaying the Palm Sunday Refugee Banner. Many of the boundaries that were once a mark of society have gone. But that banner reminds us that boundaries are alive and well and still to this day they keep people and families apart from one another sometimes on the grounds of race and religion.

Truth be known I should have chosen Amazing Grace today when I was deciding which hymns we would sing. But I'm not really a fan, I think I have sung it as a solo at too many funerals! But it really is what today all is about Amazing Grace. So we'd better begin by asking, what is it? The story goes that a conference on comparative religions were debating what beliefs were unique to Christianity. Resurrection? Not really. Incarnation? no. CS Lewis was there and said oh that's easy...it's grace! The conference came to the conclusion that indeed it is only Christianity that dares to make God's love unconditional - that's grace. Jesus preached it, he saw it everywhere - in sunshine and harvests, in men and women, in people and places were few believed it possible. Like many things he never defined it, I don't think he ever used the word. But he embodied that Grace, as John tells us in the prologue to his gospel: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only*

son, **full of grace** and truth. From his fullness we have all received, **grace upon grace**. It is the nerve centre of Christian doctrine, Christian worship and Christian life. There is life in Christian theology as long as we have a conversation about God's grace.

God's grace is all about reconciliation and reconciliation is about dealing with boundaries. The story of the Lost Sons reveals to us what occurs when God's grace encounters a boundary. Those of you who enjoyed this week's Lenten study would have heard that both the boys broke every norm of the society of their day. What they committed was the very worst case of elder abuse and yet the father despite, or perhaps because, of the humiliation he suffered offered grace upon grace. Our discussions were quite lively as you can imagine! What was the old man thinking, the silly old fool! Why did he allow this situation to occur, why did he give the boys their inheritance? After all that's when the problem started. There were no simple answers to these questions. We tend to read this parable quite simply from a moral perspective and we get it all wrong! This moralism, a black and white, right and wrong was what Jesus was challenging, because he saw the boundaries that the Pharisees created by it. The parable invites us to hold up that mirror again, who am I? It's more difficult than you might think, because we think in moral terms and Paul helps us out. He interprets this parable with this extraordinary sentence that we heard this morning: 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' This is the paradox that lies at the heart of the parable. If sin is a barrier or a boundary to grace, did the Father in the parable become the barrier by his extravagant self-giving love and that by becoming it he might negate its power.

Ultimately today is about the sense of the nearness of our Easter celebrations, the festival of reconciliation. Truth be known I should have chosen the hymn 'O Lamb of God I come' as well today. The last verse rather says it all: *Just as I am, Thy love unknown, Has broken every barrier down*. The grace of God revealed in the parable of the Lost Sons is indeed love unknown, as is the self-giving love of Christ on the cross. This is love which neither condones nor condemns but enters into the situation to such a degree that it breaks down every barrier down – from within. Our 'Rejoice' today will be echoed with even greater joy on Easter morning when we will repeat the words of the Father 'we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life.' At Easter indeed at every Eucharist we celebrate that Christ has broken down the barrier between life and death it is for this that we give thanks and upon this that we commit ourselves to act as ambassadors of reconciliation, which calls us not to moralise, but to transform; to neither condemn nor condone. Amen.