
LIVING THE CROSS IN A CHANGING WORLD

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR C

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“ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS”, FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

Joshua 5.2–12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5.16–21; Luke 15.11–32.

Joshua 5.2–12

²At that time the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time.’ ³So Joshua made flint knives, and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath-haaraloth. ⁴This 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. ⁵Although 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. ⁶For the Israelites travelled for 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. ⁷So 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.

⁸When the circumcising of all the nation was done, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. ⁹The 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.

¹⁰While the Israelites were encamped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened

cakes and parched grain. ¹²The 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.

I am sure you will be asking: “What has this to do with anything else? It may be of some interest historically but what significance can it have for us?” The priestly writers have inserted this passage on circumcision in the middle of a story about the celebration of the first Passover in the Promised Land.

The story is all about new beginnings and the future possibilities that open up for the people under God’s guiding and leading. It is also about change; the past, such as slavery in Egypt and their loss of identity as God’s people and God’s very special provision for them in the wilderness will no longer be the marks of the future. They will be marked as God’s people living under God’s covenant and their daily bread will come from the land, the provision of God.

Joshua has just taken leadership and led the people across the Jordan River from the east and now camped on the eastern boundary of Canaan (Joshua 4.1–5.2) below Jericho. Their presence has frightened the local petty kings because it is clear that Joshua is preparing the people to take possession of the land.

Gilgal is not a very famous place but it was the place where the slaves from Egypt first set foot on the promised land of freedom after the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings. Here they built the cairn of twelve stones that was a reminder that they had left behind their captivity, shame, poverty and slavery in Egypt and that their new venture was into a hard won freedom. It was hardly a freedom we would recognise but it was real enough. However, there was still a long way for the story to run. Symbols such as Gilgal are a reminder of the horrors of the past and the hope of a future very different.

Circumcision

There was one other ritual that now had to be addressed: the circumcision of those who had come through the wilderness without being circumcised. The priestly writers believed that circumcision was essential to Passover and critical to the identity of this newly forming people: hence the present passage. It was a sign of the covenant with Abraham and a reminder of their origins in the great patriarchal stories. God would be their God they would be his people. Circumcision would be the outward, personal and communal sign of that. After the exile when these books were edited into their present form the sign of circumcision became a distinguishing sign of Jewishness and in the New Testament it became a bone of contention, especially on the question of the admission of Gentile converts (see especially Galatians). The sign of the identity of freed slaves became a chain for gentile believers. Freedom takes different forms in different times.

Passover

The keeping of this first Passover in the land is also highly symbolic. The promised abundance of the land is symbolically eaten and God's special provision of manna stops. The day to day business of life is now theirs. God is always there but the special provision for the vulnerable wanderers is gone. The task lies before them. We are meant to work. Their future begins in worship and praise of the God who liberates.

Questions: How do we mark our passing from slavery into the freedom we have in Christ? Are there still pockets of slavery, poverty and shame in this country and the world that demand our attention? What are our 'Gilgals' that mark freedom from such shame and poverty into a better future? What traditions have become chains for others?

Psalm 32

Of David. A Maskil.

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Selah

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD', and you forgave the
guilt of my sin.

Selah

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding-place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

Selah

⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you
with my eye upon you.

⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must
be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

¹¹Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you
upright in heart.

Psalm 32 must be one of the better-known Psalms. Its theme, the joy of forgiveness, strongly resonates with Christian theology and experience. It also recalls Psalm 1 with its “Happy are those...” beginning. Traditionally, Ps.32 has been called the second of the penitential psalms (6; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143).

Joy of forgiveness 1–2

The Psalm begins with two beatitudes that recall Psalm 1. Happiness lies in the way of forgiveness. The psalm uses three words for sin: transgression denotes wilful rebellion, sin means to miss the mark and iniquity/guilt suggest the enduring, destructive effects of disobedience. This is Israel’s basic vocabulary for sin. Despite the psalm being about sin it is a song of thanksgiving and joy. That again characterises Israel’s understanding of sin and forgiveness.

The tragedy of unconfessed sin 3–5

The psalmist’s life is characterised by all three and the results are very real, even physical (3–4). The psalmist’s silence, the human incapacity to confess to God and take responsibility for wrongdoing, is the real problem and it is the solution that sets free the healing power of forgiveness and restoration. Silence before God on these matters is rejection of grace. Disintegration is the result; the human being slowly unravels.

God’s forgiveness on the other hand encompasses sin, transgression and guilt thus setting the recipient free to live once again; to integrate and bind the strands of life back into a whole (5). Human transparency in the presence of God is the key. We are so used to deceiving ourselves and others that it becomes a habit. The psalmist reminds us just how destructive a habit deceit is.

Celebrate 6–7

The psalmist witnesses to God’s surrounding him and encompassing him, as well as hiding him. After the release from sin and deceit the psalmist is free to pray and enjoy the presence of God in any situation whatever, no matter how dire (6–7).

Teach 8–9

It might be God or the psalmist who teaches in vss. 8–9 but both point to the learning process that must follow restoration. God will teach us if we are amenable (see last week’s notes). But we can teach the joy of being forgiven.

Rejoice in the Lord 9–10

Human sin brings great torment to human life (10) but God’s everlasting steadfast love surrounds the forgiven and gives great joy that is worth shouting about. Praise and worship are the best response to the new found freedom of forgiveness. We can only teach one another or witness to one another not from high moral ground but out of the humility appropriate to grace. We are set free; we do not set ourselves free. It is the

divine love and steadfastness that surrounds and upholds us not some inner resource of our own.

Questions: What is your experience of sin? Does forgiveness make you shout for joy? What is your witness to others about the wonders of God's great love?

This psalm celebrates what is the very heart of the Christian tradition, God's grace and forgiveness that allows us to know true happiness. Yet we rarely take time to celebrate this pivotal act of daily grace. Why might that be and what can we do about it?

2 Corinthians 5.16–21

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The new situation 16–17

Christ's death and resurrection is the transforming event of all life (see 5.14–15 the context). Nothing can be the same again. And that includes how we regard Christ and others (for whom he died). We have to regard people in the new light of the great transformation not by way of the 'flesh' (here translated 'human point of view'). Flesh is an important theological word in Paul and here it means treating the other as hostile, outsider, opponent, competitor and enemy just as Paul had once viewed Jesus. No-one presents the same appearance when viewed from the vantage point of the new order of the Spirit as they do when seen according to the flesh. And this is true of one assessment of Christ.

The possibilities this opens up for all is infinite; being in Christ means being in the One who has risen from the dead. That is the new creation. It has begun already and it is taking effect here and now. Christ's death and resurrection transforms the old, the past, just as Christ's body was transformed.

Reconciliation 18–21

In 18–21 Paul outlines the basis of reconciliation with God: in Christ God has put aside their trespass (wilful rebellion) and hostility and restored the relationship of family and friend. The initiative for this is entirely God's. The agent is Christ.

Paul and his ministry friends have been given that message to bring to the Corinthians (as well as the whole world) and are its agents (ambassadors) making that

reconciliation present and active. But the Corinthians do not seem to hear it. Thus Paul uses his God-given authority to appeal to them to join the family again. It is God who puts things right in Christ and that is the foundation of Paul's ministry and appeal to the Corinthians.

Questions: How quickly do we judge others from "human point of view"? What effects does that have on relationships? What has the new creation meant to you in your life? Are you willing to share the treasure with others? Can you see why Paul is passionate about the ministry of reconciliation? How can the church be ambassadors of reconciliation as Paul describes it here to the world?

Luke 15.11–32

¹¹Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."
²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.
²⁵Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" ³¹Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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." '

Context

This story really begins back at 15.1–2. The Pharisees indict Jesus' behaviour; "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." All three parables that follow have the same theme, God's story of lost and found. What an impact this story has made on our social consciousness, and on language; the 'prodigal son', the father's welcome and the 'fatted calf' being just some. What will happen when generations grow up not knowing this parable? How will that change how we view each other? This parable goes beyond the lost sheep and the lost coin by placing it in a family context. The loss of a son is of more significance than a coin or a sheep. The response is far more personal and challenging as well.

Welcome to the son

This parable is in two interconnected parts: 11–24 and 25–32. The story in 11–24 has a well-known main point: that God welcomes back with open arms anyone who returns. It begins with the desire of the son to have his inheritance NOW. Common advice was that this highly inadvisable (Sirach 33.20–24). Even asking was considered an insult. The young man takes his inheritance and turns it into transportable capital. The infamy increases as he then squanders that capital (the work of other's hands) and doing that while living as a gentile (the pigs). Then comes the famine that completely destroys their last remaining infrastructure of his life. He now sinks to just above the expendables of Roman society, beggars and thieves.

The young man comes to himself, comes to his senses but not yet to repentance. He would be better off at home as a day labourer in his father's household than in the gentile world where the rule was, "He does the beggar a bad service who gives him meat and drink, for what he gives is lost, and the life of the poor is prolonged to their own misery." (Plautus). As in Psalm 32 the young stops deceiving himself and decides to return home with his repentance speech coming from the heart. He can ask for nothing except what he deserves.

Welcoming father

The story now moves quickly to the proactivity of the father. The father is waiting and sees him, filled with compassion he runs to meet him. The stunning point is that in most cultures fathers so slighted do not act like this. After all, the son has taken his share of the property and turned it into cash, which brought shame on the family, but by asking for his share before the father was dead the younger sibling was saying, "I wish you were dead." No more complete and painful rejection could be imagined. Yet the father humiliates himself, running to meet the discredited son and welcome him home. And the welcome is not stingy; robes rings and fatted calves; and no blame, no shame, just the joy of being alive again, of being found. The story to this point portrays forgiveness, love and grace with attendant joy in vibrant human relationships.

The unpleasant surprise

We often forget that the real sting in the tail of the parable comes in the second part (25–32), the tale of the older brother. This part of the story is Jesus' reply to his critics who do not like him mixing with wicked tax collectors and sinners. They could not see God at work healing people, people being transformed physically, emotionally, morally and spiritually. They are self-centred and censorious; they cannot rejoice with God. They cannot see that God wants to invite even the gentiles in and yet there is plenty of room for them too, for they, like the elder son, have the most honoured position. The message falls on deaf ears blinded as they are the work of the kingdom.

Questions: Who do you identify with in the story? Meditate on this moving slowly through the story. Surely God cannot be like this? But what if it is true? How can we be elder sons or daughters?

Further Reflections

The readings this week deal with possibilities of the future but take seriously the past. In fact all of these readings lead us to reflect on transformation and change and our part in or our possible refusal of such change that journeying with the Spirit might require. They each illuminate the great difficulties and pain associated with letting go the past but the joy that comes from liberation in Christ.

Questions: Enter into the place in your life between past and future and explore how it affects your struggle for transformation in Christ. What do you learn?