

21st Century Disciples: Seek Reconciliation

Gathering

Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **purple cloth** or scarf to signify that we are moving into a time of preparation for Easter.*

Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.

Gathering

Whether you are lost in a world you no longer recognise,

or confident of your place and belonging.

Whether you are far from home, or waiting for someone you love to return.

Perhaps, in some way, we are all of these.

Today we are reminded that God meets us in all these spaces, with arms stretched wide in welcome. And each one of us is invited to the celebration!

Light Candle

We light a candle to centre us and to draw us towards Christ.

The writer of the gospel attributed to John assures us:

Jesus spoke to them, saying,

“I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12

Acknowledgement of Country

As we gather in this place, between the mountains and the sea, we give thanks for the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation.

We acknowledge the commitment their ancestors made, across the generations, to nurturing this land.

Together, may we walk into the future,

recognising the sacred footsteps that continue to lead us to the promise of [God's Way].

Amelia Koh-Butler, Wide and Deep, p.11

Introduction

Today we continue our preparations for Easter.

Throughout this time we are reconnecting with what it looks for us to be 21st Century followers of Jesus.

We started by thinking about how we engage with the Scriptures.

Then we considered how 21st Century disciples take the long view.

Last week - we were reminded that 21st Century disciples know and practice grace.



Today we dig deeper into grace - the promise that God welcomes us with arms wide open and a celebration feast - and we ask ourselves: how aware are we of our own need to seek forgiveness and reconciliation?

In many parts of the world, the 4th Sunday in Lent is recognised as “Mothering Sunday”. It is the mid-point of the Lenten fast and is a time when people were encouraged to return to their homes, to the church of their baptism, where the celebration was marked with a special feast. [Remember, Sundays are celebration days and not part of the Lenten fast.] So there is some resonance with the gospel reading today, the parable of the lost son who returns home to his family.

Call to Worship

As Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

¹⁷If 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.

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Loving Jesus,
thank you for your welcome, no matter who we are or what we have done.
Thank you for your love, offered in spite of ourselves and despite our failings.
Help us to remember that we are loved, treasured and forgiven.
Help to make that welcome and love marks of our lives.
Help us to welcome and love all those we meet.
Amen.

Spill The Beans, Issue 42, Resources for Lent 4, 27 March 2022, p.42

Sing - 10,000 Reasons (Bless The Lord O My Soul)

We sing a song of praise.

*Bless the Lord O my soul ,O my soul,
worship God's holy name.*

*Sing like never before, O my soul,
I'll worship your holy name.*

The sun comes up it's a new day dawning.
It's time to sing your song again;
whatever may pass and whatever lies
before me,
let me be singing when the evening comes.
Bless the Lord O my soul...

You're rich in love and you're slow to anger,
your name is great and your heart is kind;
for all your goodness I will keep on singing,
ten thousand reasons for my heart to find.
Bless the Lord O my soul...

And on that day when my strength is
failing,
the end draws near and my time has come;
still my soul will sing your praise unending,
ten thousand years and then forevermore.
Bless the Lord O my soul...

Jonas Myrin | Matt Redman

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Reading: Psalm 32 (Stephanie Pryor)

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

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

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

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

Selah

⁵ Then 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

⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;

at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.

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

Selah

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

⁹ Do 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.

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

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

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Gracious and loving God,
how good it is to come to you
knowing that a warm welcome is always offered,
that no matter what we have been through this week
your arms are open wide waiting.

Patient and caring Jesus,
how good it is that you have shown the way,
that all are welcome to follow you
and as often as we might drift away
you are waiting and ready to welcome us back into the fold.

Niggling and nudging Spirit,
how good it is that you are there with your niggles and nudges steering us in the right
direction back to into the arms of God and the love of Jesus.

Trinity of welcome,
forgive us for those time we have wandered away,
or turned our backs on you.
Forgive us when we have forgotten the example of Jesus
and the stories he told.
Help us to be as open to the prodigals in our lives
as you are to us.
Let the Spirit's niggles and nudges
forever bring us back to you.

Spill The Beans, Issue 42, Resources for Lent 4, 27 March 2022, p.42

Loving God, in life we play so many parts:
one day the wayward child,
another the strict parent;
sometimes jealous and confused,
other times open and kind;
some days determined to go our own way,
at other times open to your leading.

In the mix of who we are,
in the ups and downs of our lives,
in our triumphs and failures,
be the one who calls us back
who reminds us of home
and sets our feet toward
a world of welcome.

When so much is left undone,
where so much is left behind,
when so many gifts lie unused,
when too few tears have been shed,
move our hearts and minds to seek forgiveness and the reconciliation love brings.
Through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 4, 27 March 2022, p.57

Assurance

Even as we walk slow and unsure of foot God runs to greet us.
Even as we cling to being in the right God forgives what is left unspoken.
Loved and held in God's arms we are made a new creation.
Everything old has passed away everything has become new. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 4, 27 March 2022, p.57

Sing / Listen - See I Make All Things New (AOV2-7)

This song affirms Paul's encouragement to the church at Corinth: if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

*See I make all things new,
new as night turns to morning.
The spirit is calling:
"I'm with you; I make all things new."*

The rivers are bursting with life,
the stars in the night sky sing praise.
Come to me in joy,
come to me in song.

All of creation rejoice!
See I make all things new...

Trust in the promise of life;
colour the earth with my love.
Come to me in joy;
come to me in song.
Open your hearts, rejoice!
See I make all things new...

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Listening for God's Voice

Reading: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (Stephanie Pryor)

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And 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. 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.

²⁵ 'Now 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!”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.”’

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God!

Reflection

God, just as it can be our habit to break, to unbind, to distance ourselves from those we love and from those who need us, so it is your habit and your way to draw us back together and to you, and to enfold us in your everlasting arms. As we hear this familiar parable today, open our hearts and minds to hear you speaking to us again today. Amen.

Based on Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 4, 27 March 2022, p.54

21st century followers of Jesus seek reconciliation with God, and with each other, in deed with the whole of creation.

There is something about this familiar story that seems to wrap itself around us like a warm blanket. The story of the son who, after seeking his fortune elsewhere, after failing miserably, returns home where he is welcomed by his father with open arms and great celebration.

This is one of three parables Jesus tells in response to the complaint of the Pharisees and scribes that he was spending his time with all the wrong types of people (15:2). The lectionary skips over the other two parables - the one about the shepherd leaving 99 of his flock in order to find the one that is lost (15:4-7); and the woman who turns her house upside down to find the one lost coin (15:8-10). But both of these parables sit alongside the more expansive telling of one family’s experience of a son who takes his inheritance and leaves in search of something “more” beyond the confines of his family home and business.

This parable is story-telling mastery!

It is a story that easily stands the test of time - this family’s experience hasn’t dated at all - young men and women still leave the family home in search of something they can’t always define - and sometimes they do well and we can celebrate their success; and sometimes they don’t and we grieve their struggle.

It is also a story where we can find something of ourselves in almost all of the characters. Many of us can identify with being the son who takes off. We might not have ended up feeding pigs for a living - which remember for a Jewish audience would have been unthinkable and completely degrading - but we may have lost our job, lost our money, failed at whatever it was we tried.

Many of us can identify with the father and, presumably, his mother who grieved their son’s leaving and waited, hoping for his return.

I think we can also identify with the brother who stayed home, who seemingly “did the right thing” and who gets a bit cranky when the returning brother, the one who took all the money and messed up big-time, is celebrated.

There is no doubt that this parable is intended to illustrate the expansive love of God and the generous hospitality of God for every human soul who returns to God’s way.

This is the God who waits and hopes, who keeps an eye on the road and who will come running to meet us when we are still a long way from home (15:20).

This God loses all sense of respectability and celebrates with abandon when a beloved child comes home (15:20).

But what might it have to say to us as we seek to follow Jesus today?

First, it reinforces what we have said over the past few weeks about turning - about turning towards God, about changing our thinking, about each one of us needing always and everyday to reorient ourselves and return to God's way. God calls each one of us to simply come home.

But in order to do that, the story says something about our need to recognise our need, the story tells us that the man could only return home when "he came to himself" (15:17) That is, at some point, we need to be self-aware enough to recognise our need for God's love and direction. There are times in our lives when we need to recognise that where we have ended up is less than ideal and that somewhere along the line we took a wrong turn. And then, we need to have a certain amount of courage to seek God out in humility, to turn towards God, to change our thinking that convinced us that our way was best, and to seek again the One who only has our best at heart. In a sense, it is about recognising our need to be reconciled to God and to be prepared to do whatever it takes to re-establish our relationship with God.

The psalmist echoes this in Psalm 32 - when we wallow in our own failings or shortcomings, we feel lousy (and often take it out on the people around us!), but when we acknowledge who we are and what is going on for us, then God meets us and helps us in the turning (32:3,5,7). Of course, as the psalmist points out, we are all capable of being stubborn like the horse or mule (32:9), especially when it comes to admitting when we are wrong or misguided, but "steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord" (32:10).

But there is an even deeper element to this parable.

The story also has echoes of death and resurrection - the father says that his son "was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (15:32) - drawing the line between what it is like when we live our own way, and the new life we find in our returning to God, echoing the path Jesus will take to the cross and beyond.

We hear it also in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth:

¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

And Paul goes on to make it abundantly clear that not only are we called to be reconciled to God (5:20) and to live this new life, but that we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (5:18-19). That is, we need to work on our self awareness and need for staying focussed on the way God shows us; and at the same time be inviting the world we encounter to do the same, inviting our friends and neighbours to "come home", reminding them that they have a home to return to, perhaps; assuring them that they will be welcomed and celebrated when they do.

Which all sounds lovely until we realise that that means we are the ones who need to be putting on the celebration - warmly welcoming, celebrating and affirming each soul who seeks the Living God.

And that we all then need to figure out how to live with one another - the ones who rejoice as their children return, the ones who feel "used", the ones who have to deal with their guilt at losing the family fortune, and everyone else in between. Perhaps that's where the hard work begins.

21st century followers of Jesus seek reconciliation with God, and with each other, and indeed with the whole of creation.

Loving God, when we find ourselves lost in the world, sitting in the mud, starved of love and past caring, remind us that we need only to open our eyes and turn towards you and we will find you running to meet us.

When we find ourselves envious of another's journey, remind us of your love for each one of us - no matter what.

When we find ourselves waiting, hoping, longing for a friend, a loved one, our children to come home, to return to you, give us strength to keep hoping, keep praying, keep watching; help us to be always ready to welcome any and all of your children home.

And when we are all together again, remind us of your love that binds us as we negotiate relationships and seek to share in life together. Amen.

Responding

Sing - Come As You Are (TIS 693)

"Come as you are: that's how I want you.
Come as you are; feel quite at home,
close to my heart, loved and forgiven.
Come as you are: why stand alone?

"No need to fear, love sets no limits;
no need to fear, love never ends;
don't run away shamed and disheartened,
rest in my love, trust me again.

"I came to call sinners, not just the
righteous;
I came to bring peace, not to condemn.
Each time you fail to live by my promise,
why do you think I'd love you the less?

"Come as you are; that's how I love you;
come as you are, trust me again.
Nothing can change the love that I bear
you;
all will be well, just come as you are."

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Prayer for Others (Michele Broad)

Loving God,
Thank you that you are ready to welcome us home whenever we wander away.
In our prayers for others
we pray for those who face exclusion because of race, colour, sexuality, disability,
education or wealth..
Help us in our actions to imitate your inclusive love.

We pray for all for whom 'home' is not a safe place, where instead it is a place of fear and violence.

We pray for those far from 'home' seeking refuge in foreign lands waiting for a time when it will be safe to return. And we particularly remember the people of Ukraine and the more than 3.4 million people who have fled the country and the 6 million who have been displaced within the Ukraine. Also, we remember the brave men and women who have stayed to fight and defend their country and their Democracy where all the normality of "home" has been stripped away..

We pray for those where 'home' is a borrowed sofa, a community hall, a car or worse still a shop door, longing for a warm bed to call their own .

We remember all those impacted by the floods and the displacement of their homes, their livelihoods, their communities, that will go on for such a long time, holding them in insecurity and loss.

We pray for those in fear of losing their 'home' for want of a secure job or enough to live on, living with constant pressure and going without, and just wanting a certain future. We pray for those with a 'home' to call their own, that they never take this for granted, always mindful of those less fortunate. Help us to remember "There but for the grace of God, go I" Help us, O God, to be people of welcome to all who need; a people of love and generosity Amen.

Based on a prayer in Spill The Beans, Issue 42, Resources for 27 March 2022, p.43

Offering

As we make our offering, this is not just about cash - many people give electronically now - this time is also an opportunity to consider what time, skills and commitment we make to the work of God in the world...

God of extravagant love,
as we bring these our gifts to you
we offer not just these but ourselves.
May they and us be useful to you
in welcoming back the lost
and rebuilding your Kingdom,
ensuring a warm welcome for all who seek it.
Amen.

Sending

Sing - Wisdom Far Beyond Our Knowledge (Tune: TIS 477)

This song is to a tune that might be familiar - it speaks of how we all that we search for is found in God the God who send us into the world as reconcilers and makers of community.

Wisdom far beyond our knowledge,
Word of endless mystery,
God, in whom is comprehended
all that was, is now, will be,
you have set us free to wander,
world on world, through time and
space,
haunted by the hope of heaven,
nurtured by your constant grace.

Beating heart of all creation,
first and final unity,
God who draws all things together,
all that was, is now, will be,
we have heard your distant music,
shared your dream of harmony:
now we go as reconcilers,
makers of community.

Unimaginable lover,
faithful to eternity,
God, fulfilling and indwelling
all that was, is now, will be,
we can never stray beyond you,
loving Presence, you are here:
called to join your great adventure,
forth we go to find you there.

Focus of our search for meaning,
truth in our perplexity,
God the One by whom we measure
all that was, is now, will be,
centre of our heart's devotion,
magnet of our questing mind,
spirit's birth and soul's companion,
journey's end in you we find.

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Benediction

Each of you are loved and valued,
blessed by God,
cherished by God,
beloved by God.

So,
live happily,
live freely,
live wisely,

And may God's love enfold you,
may God's joy fill you,
may God's mercy wash over you
now and forevermore. Amen.

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Rev Kath Merrifield
27 March 2022