Sunday 30th March 2025
Lent 4 (Mothering Sunday)
Stirling

Joshua 5.9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5.16-21
Luke 15.1-3,11b-32

Today we are in the midst of the penitential Lenten season but this is Refreshment Sunday, Mothering Sunday, and so we are drawn to give thanks that God seeks to gather us to himself in reconciliation. Our readings from Scripture point us in the right direction so that we can see this.

In the book of Joshua, we heard that after all the trials and sufferings of the journey through the wilderness, the repentant Israelites found themselves reconciled to God. The word of the Lord came to Joshua that the disgrace of Egypt had, like a great stone, been rolled away. This relates to the Israelites earlier near rejection of their God and their longing to return to Egypt and to worship Egyptian gods.

Now the people eat for the first time the harvest of the Promised Land on the feast day of unleavened bread; by the grace of God, they have become a settled people with the promise of peace and prosperity before them. They are gifted the potential to become a new and better Israel, the people of God.

The psalm, Psalm 32, a psalm of David makes an appropriate response to God's faithfulness and grace. David sings of his own journey from disobedient wickedness, through repentance, to reconciliation with God and the recovery of trust. It's a psalm in which we can all find reassurance and support when we wander from the pathway of righteousness and find ourselves alone with the pain of a guilty conscience. God is ready to receive that pain and heal it if we will but turn back to him.

As we heard in the Gospel for today, Jesus spent time eating and talking with those who had lost their way, those who had that pain of guilt; and those who were trying hard to ignore it. People shunned by society. Of course, this caused great offence to the self-righteous who clearly thought Jesus must be crazy or naïve, misguided or downright wrong. Some even thought Jesus was an evil influence, certainly dangerous.

How soon we forget the lessons of the past, times when we have known ourselves forgiven. These opponents of Jesus had forgotten how many times their Scriptures recorded the unfaithfulness of Israel, God's patience with them and his many acts of redemption. Jesus takes time to share with his critics a series of parables concerning God's search for the lost and the sinful; culminating in this great parable of the prodigal son.

It's a very familiar parable but it continues to be startling in the way that it turns upside down what would be the normal expectations of our world. Jesus presents God as a parent who has lost a child, he has another son who remains with him but he still grieves for the one who is lost. Every day this loving parent hopes against hope that the child will return, so that he keeps vigil for him.

Then comes the day when the lost one understands his sin and makes his way home, hungry, dirty and in rags, empty handed and fearful. The love of this father is so great that even when the boy is far off, he runs to meet his child and gather him in. All false dignity and the 'done thing' laid aside, the father is reconciled to his lost son and the son is returned to the status in the household he had before he went away.

But then there is the angry, older son. He is like those who have come to criticize Jesus. It is anathema to them that the tax collectors and sinners should be considered worthy of redemption, a place in the kingdom of God. But there it is, God calls humanity to come home to him and celebrate with him in his love for us. Even the angry and the self-righteous are called if they will but listen and respond.

Paul sets that out very well in 2 Corinthians in his rejoicing that Christ reconciles us to God. It is when we enter into that new creation that Paul writes about and begin to regard and relate to people as God in Jesus Christ does, that we then raise questions in peoples' minds. We are not regarding people as the world regards them, as Paul says and they will want to know why. In being ready to give answers to those questions we share the gospel, the good news of God's love, opening the way to the grace of repentance and reconciliation. Here is the promise of new life and hope where before there seemed to be none. The world is full of anger and the suffering of the vulnerable. There is great need for the world to hear again the parable of the prodigal son, the angry older brother and the joy of the reconciling father; and we need to be reminded of it too.

> Great are the tribulations of the wicked;
> but mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord.
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> Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord;
> shout for joy, all who are true of heart.