**SUNDAY, MARCH 27, 2022 - LENT IV**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

So, as usual, I ask, where are we in the story? Because Jesus didn’t live in isolation, he’s so definitely part of the human story. Well, by now, Jesus has accomplished his ministry in the Galilee, he’s been baptized by John the Baptist, been acknowledged by God the Father as His son, been Transfigured, healed so many, many people, restoring them to the community, preached that immortal sermon on the mount, fed the five thousand - what a picnic that must have been! - done so much teaching, and attracted the attention of many, not all of it friendly, and by now he has turned his face to Jerusalem, making his way slowly to Jerusalem, to that final confrontation, the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the most important moment in human history. This did not happen quietly, stories about his amazing teachings and healings had of course been spreading all over the countryside, and he attracted crowds wherever he went. Including Pharisees, of course. Never once did they best Jesus in argument, but they kept trying. And now we are seeing Jesus in story-telling mode, parable after parable as Luke reports.

And now we consider one of the most familiar of the stories, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. For many years, I have had a lot of problems with this story. After all, I am an eldest, and, I hope, reasonably dutiful child. I can’t help feeling myself on the side of the son who went out to sulk in the field. What about me? How come I never had even a moderate party, never mind the roistering wine, women and song affairs my brother spent his whole inheritance on? I can go on being indignant and feeling hard done by for quite a long time.

And then somebody pointed out a truth: I’m identifying with the wrong child: we most of us at some point will be in the same need of mercy and compassion as the wastrel son who spent his all on a good time.

The younger child who goes to a far away place, with his inheritance, probably with the desire to create his own identity, his own place in society, he was going to be a big shot from the outset, and make good connections so as to create a wonderful and prosperous career, and lead an outsize life. And show up his older, smug and self-satisfied big brother. And combining disastrous misjudgement with truly horrible timing, he wakes up one awful morning with no food, certainly no wine, no fine clothes, no fancy women, no servants, not even shoes, nothing to his name but his oldest most ragged linen tunic, and famine in the land. Vey little food to be had, even if you had the money for it. Our younger son is forced to go work for a farmer, feeding pigs. Pigs, I ask you! How truly insulting and humbling a comedown for a young man from a good Jewish family! And at that, the pigs ate better than the new farmhand did.

So our spendthrift younger son came to his senses, and he went home, because even the least of his father’s slaves had it better than he did as a pig minder. He went with the humblest of hopes, looking only for subsistence, and well prepared to admit his sins and repent them, however humiliating it might be: he knew his father would give him better treatment than what he was receiving at the hands of the foreign pig owner.

So what happened? His father saw the repentant son from far away, and came running out to show the younger son who had sinned in such a big way, welcome, honour, forgiveness and mercy. This father, like any parent, rejoiced to see his strayed, but now humbly repentant son come home.

I once heard a saying: Home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in. This father took his son back in.

And so it is with us: God will take us back. He will forgive us, if we repent. He will take us back, however sinful we have been, no matter what, as soon as we say we’re sorry. And MEAN it. Repentance brings mercy, and compassion, and joy in Heaven. And who of us doesn’t need compassion? Who among us doesn’t have some sin on our conscience? I’m no saint, there are quite a few things I regret saying and doing. And I certainly am relying on God’s mercy to keep me out of serious trouble.

And the older, dutiful son who feels so neglected? Whose own father tells him that “Everything I have is yours”? Is he entirely innocent of pride, a feeling of smug virtue about his behaviour? Something to think about.

Father Audrius has reminded us several times that Lent is a good opportunity to do a metaphorical housecleaning of the soul, to think about our sins and repent them. To go humbly to God, and admit that we’ve messed up, and to ask for mercy. This isn’t easy, it sometimes takes an awful shock to realize that we’re not perfect, that we need to repent too. But it worked pretty well for the prodigal son!

And I remind you, as usual, that we don’t have to do all this painful soul searching on our own: we have the Holy Spirit on our side, in this room, in our hearts and everywhere, at this moment and in all moments, helping, advising, comforting us; we need only to calm down and listen to that still small voice. How cool is that?

Amen