

Now I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I'm still getting used to preaching in a service where there are so many scriptures read. In London I might have one or perhaps two readings but today we've had four, an Old Testament, a Psalm, an Epistle, and a Gospel. Sometimes when we have four readings, they can seem pretty random. One can wonder why they've been all selected on the same day. Then other days there's a theme which seems to bind them all together. When I was reading these readings earlier in the week, one thing leapt out from all of them at me and that was the theme of a fresh start, a new beginning. All the readings seem to me to be bound together by that theme.

The Old Testament reading from Joshua marks a momentous day in the life of the people of Israel. The passage comes straight after the people have entered the Promised Land so you'll know the story that Moses raised his stick, the sea was parted, they went through the sea. They came up, they took some stones and when they arrived on the other side in the Promised Land, they put the stones there, and made an altar, and called that place Gilgal, which was to have an important place in the life of Israel. This was the day they finally ended their forty years wandering in the desert and began their new life in the Promised Land and they could start eating the produce of that new land. For those forty years God had provided a manna for them, which they collected every morning but that ceased on this day because now in the Promised Land they could eat the produce of this new and fertile land.

This explains why God said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." It was a fresh start, a new beginning for the people of Israel. Maybe this theme across all the readings spoke loudly to me because obviously we're still in the process of a new beginning of fresh starts and like the Israelites, I'm getting used to eating new things and at new times. I'm getting used to having my evening meal at a time when back in England they're still finishing up their tea and scones.

This week I was invited to lunch at 11:35. What were they thinking of? Do they not know anything of the

joy of elevenses, these people? How can you have elevenses and then lunch at 11:35? [Ed. note: *Dictionary, British "light refreshment (as a snack) taken in the middle of the morning"*] I'm adapting to this fresh start. I've driven on the freeway. I've body surfed in the ocean. I'm trying to eat less carbs. I've eaten more quinoa than is good for any man. I've been to the DMV where a little bit of my soul died. On Monday I was upset because it was cloudy in the afternoon as well as the morning. On reflection, I thought, I'm getting too used to this new way of living just as the Israelites had to get used to their new way of being in the Promised Land.

Moving on to the Psalm, then. The Psalm...is about the joy that the psalmists found in confessing their sin. Verse 1, "Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sin is put away." Verse 6, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, then you forgave me the guilt of my sin." The psalmist experienced the fresh start that comes with forgiveness. As he confessed his sins to God, he found the slate was wiped clean. He discovered that with God there's always the joy, and the promise, the hope of a new beginning. The psalmist writes about the joy of being relieved of the burden of guilt.

There was a great film in the 80s. I'm sure many of you saw it. It had a very haunting score. It's called, *The Mission* and there's a few very great things in that film but one of them, around which the film hinged really was about the character Robert De Niro played called Mendoza. Mendoza was a mercenary who'd killed and enslaved the Guarani Indians for years. Eventually he realizes the error of his ways and he comes to faith. He goes to Father Gabriel, played by Jeremy Irons, and confesses his sin and Gabriel says to Mendoza, he spells out the hope and the promise of forgiveness but Mendoza won't accept it. He thinks his sins have been so bad that he's beyond the pale and so Father Gabriel agrees to give him a penance to help him deal with his sin. He carries around a net containing all the accouterments of his past mercenary life, so armor, the nets, swords, lots of things that he's used in his previous existence, and that's an example of the burden of his sin in that net.

He goes up to meet the Indians where he thinks the only satisfactory outcome is that they kill him, that

that's the only way his sins can be atoned. He goes with the others, with Gabriel and the others up to this mountain but what he doesn't realize is that Gabriel has been teaching the Guarani Indians about forgiveness. There's a poignant scene when they get to the top of the mountain. Mendoza is covered in sweat because of pulling this heavy load and there he expects to meet his fate as the Guarani Indians take their revenge but instead they cut the rope and his net opens and everything that's inside falls down the mountainside. It's a very vivid picture of what the psalmist experienced and writes about in this psalm. Mendoza was weary of his burden of guilt and he was relieved of it. Those who he feared would take his life gave him a fresh beginning.

Then we come to these two glorious readings from the New Testament, which seem to me to go together as a pair. Paul writes, "If any one is in Christ there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away. Everything has become new." That idea is beautifully illustrated in Jesus' story of the prodigal son. The man who frittered away his inheritance and ended up feeding pigs, obviously a task that wasn't just menial but was offensive to the religious sensibilities of the time. He was hungry, so hungry that he found himself contemplating eating pig swill. That was the point he came to his senses. "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to spare," he said, "But here I am dying of hunger. I will get up and go to my father and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands."

The prodigal son was weary of his burden of hunger and poverty and his father was more than willing to relieve him of that burden. "While he was still far off," it says, "His father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." The father ignored the son's prepared speech. You'll see he doesn't even get the chance to be half way through what he planned to say because the father ordered the servants to clothe him, kill the fatted calf, and have a party to celebrate. We understand the father in that story to represent God to us, the same God who forgave the sins of the psalmist. Our God is a God who longs to forgive. There's no judgment in this story, only grace, mercy,

and the promise of a new beginning. It's a beautiful story of reconciliation.

Paul offers us a telling theological insight into the nature of that reconciliation. Look at what he says in the middle of our Epistle, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." God reconciles us to himself through Christ. Notice it's us who are reconciled to God, not God who is reconciled to us. It's not that God is angry and we need to do something to appease him. We don't need to earn God's favor. That's the point of the parable, the father's love and affection for his younger son never wavered, even when he went away with his inheritance. When he didn't know where he was his love for him remained constant. Every day he went out looking for him, ready to welcome him home. The moment of reconciliation happened when the son returned to the father. The change was on the side of the son, not the father. The chance at a fresh start came when the son returned to his senses and confessed his sins to his father.

The New Testament concepts of grace, that Isaac Newton found so amazing, is that we don't need to earn our forgiveness and salvation because in Jesus, God has already reconciled us to himself. In Christ did what was necessary to open the way back to him. There is nothing that we need to do other than ask for his forgiveness and turn to him.

Going back to that Gospel story, I found myself wondering in the week, what would have happened if when the younger son returned he met not his father first but he met his older brother out on the driveway. How would the story have gone then? Would the older brother have been so gracious? I don't think so. I could imagine the conversation. "Do you know how upset your father's been? He's been pacing around every day since you've left wondering where you are. You didn't tell us where you were going. Don't just think you can waltz back in here and everything will be the same. You don't deserve anything. We need to sit down and talk about the money." The story would be so different. The fatted calf might be relieved but there'd be a very different ending to the story. There'd be no fresh start for the younger brother.

As many of you know, I was away with the vestry last weekend. We had a great time at that beautiful Camp Stevens up in Julian. We look forward to sharing more about it with you next week and Sherry will be saying something about that in a moment. I left with an overriding feeling that the vestry wants the opportunity for a fresh start, which is something that I've sensed here amongst the wider congregation since we came. No one wants to revisit the difficulties of the recent past. We're weary of the burden of conflict. Of course we'll still disagree about certain things but we want to find a fresh way of disagreeing that's not unkind.

In Jesus there's always the hope of a fresh beginning. Let's work and pray together at making that a reality here at St. James. Claim the promise, which is offered to us. The problems of the past need have no effect on the promise of the future. As St. Paul reminds us, "Everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new." Let's strive to make that promise a reality amongst us.

The big part of that is recognizing that we ourselves are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. We are to treat people as the father treated his son in this story, not as the older brother. We are to give each other that opportunity of a new beginning and a fresh start that God offers each one of us. This week when we see someone coming towards us in the street, or work, or in church think about the question, "How am I going to greet them? Will I greet them as the older brother greeted his brother in the story? Or will I greet them as the father greeted the wayward son?" We have a choice.

The people of Israel laid down the burden of wandering in the wilderness and entered a fresh start in the Promised Land. The psalmist laid down the burden of guilt and sin and enjoyed the fresh start of forgiveness. The prodigal son laid down the burden of his poverty and pride and had a fresh start at home.

What about us? Let's take a moment to consider what burden we might lay down and in what area of our life we might want a new and fresh start.