



Fourth Sunday of Lent

3rd April 2011

Deuteronomy 10: 12-21, Ps 32: 1-7, Hebrews 5: 1-10, Luke 15: 11-32

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The question that's asked in today's Old Testament reading is asked for the third time so far in this year's Sunday readings. We heard it on 30th January, again on 13th February and now, third time lucky, it is asked once again: '*What does the Lord your God require of you?*' It is THE question to contemplate during Lent, a question that drove Jesus into the wilderness of discovery, and a question for all seeking to find the thread of life that leads us beyond a world shaped by mortality and into a world that is creative of eternity.

Our reading of Scripture gives us an opportunity to reflect on ancient wisdom, an opportunity to glimpse a reflection of the Divine, and so too an opportunity to open ourselves to encounter the divine in the core of our being. So for the third time we look at the readings holding the question: '*What does the Lord your God require of you?*' The answer given in Deuteronomy looks quite simple, and it looks like an answer that tells us exactly what to do.

'Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.[v12-13]'

Question and answer:

What does the Lord your God require of you?

fear the Lord

walk in all his ways

love him

serve the Lord your God

keep the commandments

It looks like an answer of 'doing', but it is actually referring to our 'being'. The context of the question in verses 11 and 12 makes this clear: '*What does the Lord your God require of you.... for your own well being?*' So we are invited to bring the question and the answers as given into ourselves:

fear the Lord - be aware, be conscious of the mystery of the Divine

walk in all his ways - be alive always to the Divine presence

love him - engage in the intimacy of relationship

serve the Lord your God - points us to an orientation of giving

keep the commandments - hold a reference point, a reference point for our attentiveness.

Put simply, in seeking our “well being” in the Word of God we seek a newness of life, going beyond a knowing of ourselves as people confined to and by this world; going beyond and into a knowing ourselves as embraced by the Divine. This movement into our ‘well being’ is not determined by a road map of commandments that will take us out of the wilderness, but rather it is process of becoming that requires our active participation. Picture the narrative of Lent: Jesus goes into the wilderness; he wasn’t looking for a bookshop that sold a street directory to show him the way out; he went in seeking his truth, seeking himself, and only then could he walk out.

Today this is illustrated for us in the gospel parable, but before we explore the parable, there is a delightful underlining of movement in verse 16 of Deuteronomy; *Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.* Circumcising the foreskin of your heart speaks of an inner action, rather than an outward mark of rightness. And the call, “do not be stubborn”, calls us out of the non-movement of staying where we are. To be stubborn is to hold fast to the non-movement of self-rightness. ‘Do not be stubborn.’ So we look at the parable of the Prodigal Son, and let’s seek to further our appreciation of the question, ‘*What does the Lord your God require of you?*’ We are seeking an impetus and an orientation for movement, a movement out of the wilderness of Lent and into the Celebration of Easter.

If we look at the parable beyond the overlay of ‘forgiveness’ and focus on the encounters, the exchanges and the movements, then we might appreciate that the parable is an illustration of the interaction between humanity and divinity. This is much more than a description of the relationship between God and “man”, father and son; it illustrates the integration of ourselves into our Christ-likeness, the creation of our “well being’ by realizing our divine wholeness in eternity.

Let’s start with the ‘stay at home’ son. He is doing the right and proper thing; he obeys God’s word (the father’s) and does God’s work (the father’s). He looks very much like everyone’s expectation of a good Christian. And yet we discover at the end of the narrative that he is unconscious of the Divine; it has to be pointed out to him; “*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*” He had no insight – looking good, going nowhere. His ‘doing’ and his ‘being’ had no alignment with the Divine, and who he is, his well being, is therefore still to be made manifest. He is unable to live in a celebration of life. Without encountering the Divine he blindly slaves in a world confined by mortality, and his self-rightness, his being stubborn, keeps him where he is, no movement.

The other son, labelled the prodigal son, might better be labelled the son who encounters God. Right from the very beginning, in verse 11, he is aware of what God has to give; he knows right at the beginning is that the abundance that is his father’s abundance, is also his abundance, something we have yet to know ourselves. Like many, perhaps like us all, he failed to multiply his blessings. When he received of his father’s abundance, he squandered all that was given – most probably sat in front of his TV watching Jerusalem play Jericho in goalless draw. Australians watch an average of 22 hours television per person per week.

http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/med_tel_vie-media-television-viewing

However, we see from the unfolding story that he remains aware, he is aware of his needs and he finds himself in the wilderness of humility. A pivotal point in the movement of the narrative is found in verse 17; *'when he came to himself'*. In his coming into himself, he is enabled to move and to reorientate his being, and so too his movement, toward the Divine. He does not seek forgiveness, but rather he seeks to be in the presence and in the employ of his father, to be at home doing God's work, seemingly looking exactly like what his brother is doing and yet completely different. He came to himself and then he moves into his wholeness of being – he moves into his 'well being'.

Now when we look at the father's movement we discover a most unorthodox God. The father does not forgive his son – read it closely - for he is not even looking for sin, nor looking for restitution, nor looking for judgment. Rather he celebrates what is to be found. And even more unorthodox, God the father is not the creator or even the initiator of the Divine activity, the divine movement of the parable. Rather, it is the son's movement toward the father that brings the father out into the narrative.

In the light of this parable, when we ask the question, *What does the Lord your God require of you?* The answer has a mystical simplicity – Nothing! Nothing ! The two brothers today clearly illustrate that nothing is 'required'. The abundance and the inheritance of God is a given, it's there. The presence of the Divine, is a given.

So maybe we should contemplate what we might do that will induce the Divine to run toward us, to embrace us and to kiss us. Contemplate that **our** movement and **our** non-movement is that activity of creation, and it is the activity that will, or will not make manifest the activity of God.

The Lord be with you

Peter Humphris