

**Sermon preached at Holy Trinity at the Eucharist
on Sunday 14 March 2010 at 6.30pm**

Joshua 5 v.9-12

Luke 15 v.1-3, 11b-32

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever been totally absorbed by something of beauty? I once spent an hour looking at one piece of art, - the Venus de Milo, the classical Greek statue of Aphrodite, displayed in the Louvre. I found the statue to be irresistible. I kept on walking around it, and wherever I paused, the beauty of the sculpture seized my mind. From every angle the form was so full of grace that my mind, my spirit and my senses were captivated. There was no escaping from the power of its beauty. I felt and thought as the poet John Keats felt and so finely expressed in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*:

‘When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’

Such an absolute claim, such absolute certainty ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ is out of tune with our post modern age, that wishes to see everything sceptically and in context, mistrusting authority and the absolute, proclaiming the relative as the spirit of our age. Nor had Keats’s words fared any better in their own time as people grew to think over the eighty years following Keats’ death that ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ was nothing more than specious pleading, a strap line favoured by the aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde.

Well, I’ll have none of that, for ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ is a profoundly religious sentiment, especially is it a profoundly Christian statement. Let us think of the parable we have heard this evening, the parable of the prodigal son. Recollect the parable in your mind, walk around it as if it were the statue of Aphrodite in the Louvre. Listen to the story of the young and damaged prodigal son wrapped up in his own needs and desires, discarding the love of family and of his father, only in the end to scheme to put that love to the test by offering a deal. Listen to the story of the older and damaged brother constantly thinking about his own claim to the inheritance to the exclusion of all joy and compassion. Then, listen to the story of the loving and forgiving father running to embrace the son who was lost, running ahead of all dignity to offer love without setting conditions. And above all, listen to the story of the loving and forgiving father seeking out his elder son, trapped in anger and resentment and self regard, to caress him into entering the circle of celebration and joy. The parable of the prodigal father, whose out pouring of love knows no bounds, has exquisite literary grace and penetrating delineation of character. Jesus has led us to an understanding of the prodigal father as the image of God. The prodigal father’s never ending and never circumscribed love is God’s assurance to us of a divine mercy surpassing all expectation. In this truth there is great beauty, and in the beauty of this parable there is great truth.

Such a truth has to be lived, by us. Walk around the parable again and think where we are ourselves, where we have been and where we have come from. Most necessarily, think 'where are we going?' The beauty of the parable of the father with two sons has all the potential to transform us. Whether we are lost in a foreign country of absorption in the world's demands and delights, far from the embrace of our heavenly parent, or whether we are lost behind a barricade of self righteousness, there is always the potential for us to turn to God and to receive the warmth of his love. The power of God's transforming love has such grace and beauty as to make the beauty of the statue of Aphrodite simply a pale intimation of immortality.

Now I don't want to suggest that coming to know the truth and the beauty of the love and mercy of God is somehow only to do with the mind and the spirit. Jesus is always gutsy. Have you noticed how much food features in the parable? Jesus tells the parable in response to the Pharisees and scribes objecting to Jesus' table fellowship with sinners. Then we have dissolute living, famine, feeding the pigs and envying them their grub, the fatted calf being sent off to slaughter, and finally the party, the great feast. Why? Why imagine our relationship with God in this way. What is Jesus doing? Food is necessary for life. Food is a blessing from God to sustain our lives on earth. Food has to do with the here and now. We only need to be deprived of it for a few days to feel in our guts how important and necessary it is. And that is part of the point. Living in a right relationship with God is as urgent and as necessary as a full belly. It is necessary now. We pray for God's kingdom to come here on earth as in heaven. The great feast is an image Jesus uses both for the present and the future, the life of now as well as the life of eternity.

Finally, as we walk around the parable of the prodigal father, sensing and believing that from every aspect the image is so full of grace that our mind, our spirit and our senses are captivated, let us pause a while and recollect that the elder brother has registered his resentment and anger by not coming to the feast, and we do not know whether he will. Jesus has left the questions open and unanswered. Will we open our hearts to Christ and come in to the feast? And will we welcome our brothers and sisters to sit beside us at the same feast? The answer is in us, and will remain with us, for Jesus has revealed to us the truth of God's love and forgiveness. Tonight we worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. We are then sent out to live a life of truth and forgiveness, to make the parable of the man who had two sons live within us and so, with God's grace, transform us. The answer is in us, and will remain with us. Amen.