

## Lent IV Laetere Sunday ChCh-St. Luke's 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019

### Readings

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Cor.5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

### Reflection

*"Hello, brother"* – with these words Haji-Daoud Nabi greeted his killer at the door of the Al Noor Mosque on Friday March 15<sup>th</sup>.

*"Hello, brother"* - words of peace and unconditional love.

*"I cannot deny the fact that he is my human brother, each human being is my brother, is my sister"* explained Farid Ahmed at the National Memorial service last Friday, his wife Husna having been killed in the terror attack. *"This is my faith, and this is what Allah has taught me. That's why I do not hate him, and I cannot hate him. I cannot hate anyone."*

Here in Christchurch in 2019, we have a new lived-out parable on human and divine relationships – a horrifically and outrageously lived-out parable beginning with a brotherly greeting, utterly violated by a most heinous terrorist act against a targeted group of humanity, yet followed by prodigal love and forgiveness – this generous love and forgiveness *made possible* by faith in, and relationship with, a God of prodigal love and forgiveness.

As Fr John O'Connor has written<sup>i</sup>: *'Our western secular minds are struggling with this generosity. Around the world whenever terrorism strikes, caused by west or east, Christian or Muslim or any other group, the response is overwhelming anger and more war. But something different has happened here in Christchurch and in New Zealand, led by the powerful witness of faith of our Muslim brothers and sisters. Within minutes New Zealanders were reaching out to each other bridging every unresolved division. A terrorist acted to divide and destroy, but we are responding with love and forgiveness.'*

Here in Christchurch in 2019, the Muslim community and the people of Christchurch and beyond - of all faiths and none - who have responded relationally with love and solidarity, have given the world another parable, a new, yet ancient paradigm.

Today's gospel reading is a parable on relationships – a parable that is variously-titled in different Bible versions: the parable of the compassionate father, the story of the lost son, the parable of the prodigal and his brother...

*“Hello, brother” – “each human being is my brother, is my sister” “this is what Allah has taught me”*

The God that Haji-Daoud Nabi and Farid Ahmed built relationship with – Allah - is the Abrahamic God who embraces us all, and whom we as Christians understand most fully through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, our brother, the Christ.

And in Jesus' parable – the parable I like to call 'our prodigal God' – we are invited to locate ourselves in the story. Each character in the story represents a distinct and specific personality incarnating the full gamut of values, attitudes and reactions by which we relate to God and to each other. Much more than the drama between a foolhardy and thoughtless young man who eventually discovers and admits to his misdemeanours on the one hand, and, on the other, a self-righteous brother who will not accept either mistakes or reconciliation, this is the story of a father whose unchanging love reconciles opposites, a father who is passionate about restored relationships.

Through this parable, we are invited - in all our brokenness and sinfulness - to submit to the 'prodigal' (meaning 'extravagantly wasteful') love and mercy of God. Because God (depicted here as Father) shows a love that is outrageously expressed. A father who never stops looking for a single child, no matter where they have strayed; a father who, on catching sight of the lost one returning, runs with joy to embrace his beloved, treats them like royalty and then throws a party in their honour; a father who shares all that he has with his children.

In this parable (the third in an increasingly-relational trilogy revealing God's nature), the father is obsessed with re-establishing proper relationships with *both* children - *and* between them. In the dialogue with the father who is inviting him to join in the celebration for the return of his brother, the older son, full of indignant condemnation, never acknowledges his sibling as brother or 'my brother', calling him a very distant and derogatory 'this son of yours'. By contrast, the father retorts with the language of relationship on which healing and forgiveness rest: 'We have to celebrate and rejoice, because, 'this brother of yours was dead and has come to life'.

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God's love and forgiveness is absolute, unconditional and universal. As one commentator states<sup>iii</sup>: accepting that we are loved and loveable in our brokenness is a harsh demand because it deprives us of control and we just have to accept love as a gift. Regardless of how sinful we may be or think we are, we are wrapped in God's love like a rich new cloak, and gifted by God as with a precious ring that a lover has unexpectedly placed on our finger to show their love for us.

Such a revelation is as confronting as it is affirming. Both sons need healing through accepting this call to reconciliation born of love, or the joy for the return of one will only provoke the distancing of the other. Healing, through acceptance and love is both personal and communal.<sup>iv</sup>

And what of the perpetrator of such terrorism here in Christchurch? One who lost loving relationship through the death of his father, who lost identity and 'Self', one who 'lost his goodness' – as a four-year-old described it? Can we claim that love overcomes hatred, light conquers darkness? Can we pray for him?

In the words of Farid Ahmed: "*People ask me: 'why do you forgive someone who has killed your beloved wife?' The answer is ... I have a faith; I believe in Allah, and Allah says that if we forgive one another, he loves me, he loves us.*"

*"I don't want to have a heart that is boiling like a volcano ... it doesn't have peace; it burns itself within, and it burns the surroundings.*

*"I want a heart that will be full of love and care, and will have mercy."*

*"I have chosen peace, I have chosen love, and I have forgiven"...*

*"I don't hold any grudges. I just don't understand. I have compassion for them, I hope and pray that they will learn, listen and they will be turned as better humans and they will care for people instead."*

*"I cannot deny the fact that he is my human brother, each human being is my brother, is my sister.*

*"This is my faith, and this is what Allah has taught me."*

We believe in an extravagantly loving and merciful God – a Prodigal God who runs to meet us, embracing us with overwhelming joy, calling us into lifegiving relationships with Godself and with each other...

*Now, I've been smiling lately, thinkin' about the good things to come  
And I believe it could be - something good has begun.*

*'Cause out on the edge of darkness*

*There rides a peace train.*

*Oh, peace train take this country.*

*Come take me home again<sup>v</sup>.*

How might we live out peace, love and reconciliation towards our brothers and sisters – those closest to us, and those most different to us - this coming week?

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<sup>i</sup> Fr John O'Connor, 'Hello Brother', [www.foodforfaith.org.nz](http://www.foodforfaith.org.nz)

<sup>ii</sup> Peter Varengo, *Seed among the vines*, p.54, Wipf and Stock, Oregon, 2012

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, p.54,55

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid*, p.55

<sup>v</sup> Cat Stevens - Peace Train Lyrics | MetroLyrics