24th Sunday Year C (11.9.16)

Fr Jarred Mercer

Exod 32.7-11 and 13-14
Ps 51
1 Tim 1.12-17
Lk 15.1-32

I cannot tell you where I was 15 years ago on September 10th, or what I was doing or thinking, or what exactly was happening in the world. I can't relive the smells, the sights, the sounds, the earth under my feet, but perhaps like most of us in this room, my entire being, from my temporal lobe down to the extremities of my body, remembers September 11th 2001, 15 years ago today.

I was sitting in a classroom in my Florida high school when we turned on the television to see a continuous stream of smoke bursting forth from the first of the twin towers in New York, as fast as steam from a kettle freshly brought to boil.

No one really knew what was happening yet. But as we were watching in amazement, with voices of the news commentators blending into the sounds chaos in the streets, a second plane came across the screen and crashed into the other tower, and shortly thereafter, though each moment seemed like days, both towers crumbled to rubble and a cloud of dust. The horror of it all was quite a lot to take in. We didn't move from that classroom that day. We were stuck, stuck in those moments when everything changed.

It is very telling, though perhaps not surprising, how God inevitably features in these types of experiences. Nearly everyone interviewed in New York in the following days mentioned how they turned to prayer in the midst of the horrific events, even if it was something as simple as: 'God help us'. And shortly after the initial cry to God, attentions turn to questions.

Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury, was in New York just about a block away from the twin towers when the attacks took place. And he spoke of the experience of a stranger asking him the next morning: 'Where the hell was God in this?'. Williams later that morning preached in a nearby church and answered the question the stranger asked him by saying essentially this: God is *useless* here. Now, you probably didn't expect to come to church and hear about the uselessness of God! But let's take a look at what he meant.

We shouldn't try to shore things up too quickly, making pithy statements about a God who allows human freedom and so can be let off the hook for the world's tragedies, or apologetic arguments to ease our worries or 'prove' something about God, as if God were an equation, or someone sitting over in the corner of the room that can be described or figured out or understood. God doesn't need to be rescued from our vacant and self-idolatrous fantasies about what he is or isn't like. God is

'useless' to us in that God is not something that exists for our *use*. Making God into a utilitarian object we can use to accomplish our own agenda, making God *useful*, is perhaps the root of idolatry. If we try to imagine God as a utility, an instrument, for our progress or protection, we are off on the wrong foot from the start.

Our parables this morning provide us with a different footing, and present God in a way, I think, that makes God much more desirable than a tool for our own wielding, or a scapegoat to be blamed for the ills and tragedies of our world.

Our three parables teach us that God stops at nothing to rescue the lost, and that in doing so he is not measured or practical, he is not *useful*, but reckless, even wasteful. These parables are Jesus' response to the religious leaders being upset by his dining with tax collectors and sinners. Christ is overturning the structures of the world, reordering human

society, and the privileged, well-off, important people will have none of it.

The situation is essentially that the lost ones, the ones who are seemingly far from God and his love, are swept away by that love, and renewed by it. The 'insiders' on the other hand, reject God's perfect love, as it overturns the world as they know it—the world where they wield power and influence.

The third parable is often called the parable of the 'prodigal son'. The word prodigal coming from the Latin for lavish or recklessly wasteful, a squanderer. The lost son is certainly that. He squanders his father's living. The text says he 'lived without control'. He is reckless and senseless to the point of ruin.

He eventually finds himself tending to the pigs of a Gentile. It is difficult to imagine anything more alienating for a Jew of this time. Tending to pigs was even forbidden in the Mishnah. The son here becomes the ultimate

marginalised outsider, far beyond the pale of what is acceptable. He joins the ranks of tax collectors and sinners.

But when he comes to himself and returns home, his father not only receives him, but adorns him, honours him—he brings the marginalised and rejected to the centre of the story.

Before the son has the time to repent or ask to be the father's hired servant, the father 'moved with compassion', runs out to embrace his son. The text says literally that the father 'fell on [his son's] neck'. And extravagant symbols of acceptance—robe, ring, feast and celebration—are immediately bestowed.

Jesus is telling us that this is the kind of Father God is: not the God who is 'useful' to us in getting what we want or think we deserve; not the God who explains away the hurt and sorrow of the world; but the God who, when we are still far off, sees, feels, runs, embraces, and celebrates us.

And he does so not by making sense of a broken world, or keeping us at every turn from a life that squanders away his goodness, but by invading the brokenness and suffering we have caused and bringing it to renewal and restoration. For there is nowhere where God's embrace of us is more complete than when he inhabits our suffering in Jesus Christ. Christ opens wide his arms for us on the cross and 'falls on our neck' in embrace to welcomes us home: a wasteful, lavish, senseless, squanderer of love.

You see, the father in the story is every bit as reckless and wasteful; he is every bit a squanderer. He is risky and lavish —he squanders his love. This is really more the parable the prodigal father than the prodigal son.

The second group Jesus is addressing, the pharisees, are compared to the older son. The older son is just as 'lost' as the younger, not due to physical proximity or distance from the

father, but through bitterness and alienation, which is much harder to overcome: he refers to himself as the father's slave rather than his son.

The father, however, is just as reckless in his love for the older son as the younger. 'All that is mine is yours', he says, 'all that is mine is yours'. If the first part of the story is a pure presentation of Gospel: the lost are found, the dead are raised to new life, sinners are repenting at the call of Christ, and the second half of the story is a sad commentary on the pharisees' rejection of Christ's call to repentance, the whole of the story is a picture of the reckless love of God for both: 'robe, ring, and calf', for one, and 'all that is mine is yours' to the other: God's prodigal love is shown to be completely indiscriminate.

This is a wasteful, prodigal Father, who lavishes, senselessly, unending and perfect love on those who throw it away: running out to greet us in our sin through the outstretched suffering arms of Christ on the cross.

This is the God who is waiting for any excuse, any opportunity, to welcome us home.

We do not serve a God who simply tries to explain himself so that he can be understood. We serve a God who in Christ reaches out and touches with human hands, who meets us in our suffering and shame; who falls upon our neck, and pulls us into resurrection glory. So the message to us today, as we come to the Altar of salvation, is simply this: welcome home.