

**Mothering Sunday, Lent 4, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019. Canongate Kirk.**

St Luke 15: 20      *But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.*

At first sight it's an odd reading for Mothering Sunday, the entirely male-dominated Parable of the Prodigal Son. Whether your sympathy lies with the recalcitrant younger brother, or the long overlooked elder brother, or the patient father overflowing with compassion and forgiveness, there's no mention of a mother. Whether she's in the background cooking the fatted calf or whether she herself has died of a broken heart over the absence of her baby boy, we'll never know. But we do know that Mothering Sunday has not always been about mothers, important though they are, but rather about mother churches, about encouraging people to return to their mother churches and we'll come back as it were to that in a moment. In the Church's calendar this fourth Sunday in Lent is also known as Refreshment Sunday when the austerity and self-denial of the penitential season could be temporarily lifted along with the traditional prohibition of flowers in church.

*As pants the hart for cooling streams  
In parched and barren ways,  
So longs my soul for you, O God,  
And your refreshing grace.*

It's self-inflicted austerity and self-denial of course that lie behind the eventual plight of the prodigal son, reduced to eyeing hungrily the very fodder of the pigs he's sent to tend. How he must have longed for some of the psalmist's refreshing grace and in the end it was an amazing grace that saved a wretch like him and prompted him to return not to his mother church but to his family home. *But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.* Perhaps there is a message there for the church after all on this Mothering Sunday, when we might spare a thought for those who have drifted away from the church for one reason or another and ask ourselves how we might encourage them to find a way back to the mother church, the family church, the home church, or wherever. And there's a clue surely in how the father of the prodigal son responds when he sees and recognises his long lost son making his nervous and humble approach. He goes out to meet him and brings him in. *But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him.*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;  
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

Perhaps in this day and age we shouldn't sit back and wait for people to find their own way back to church, perhaps we need to be ready to meet them half way. After all is that not what God has done for us in the Son who once and for all stretched out his arms and welcomed us home? In the Alternative Service Book of the Church of England there's a prayer that sums it up, not least on what for us is also a Communion Sunday, so let us pray: *Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that, when we were still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us so we and all your children shall be free and the whole earth live to praise your name, through Christ our Lord.* Amen.