

**Sermon: 5.3.18-Lent 3-2018** *“The father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” St Luke 15.22-24*

There seem to be crossed wires between God and Balaam: Balaam gets the green light to go with the princes of Moab, and then God’s anger is kindled against him for going. Somehow Balaam has got the wrong end of the stick-yet he uses this same stick to beat the poor old ass and regrets not having a sword with which to kill her. He reminds me of St Peter in his stubborn stupidity, and memorable though the tale is, it is not at all clear quite what the point of it is....except it does display powerfully the patience that God has towards each one of us, flogging our poor old donkeys to persist in taking yet more wrong turnings and yet being spared....

Lent is a stark and difficult time, a time when the Gospels and Epistles pull no punches: spiritual warfare is the name of the game and living good lives, which are radiant with the light of Christ, is our calling. We have just heard it again. In Oxford, as in much of the West I suspect, we take ourselves a bit too seriously for all this talk of devils. We do so to our cost: they feature in four of the five Lent Sunday Gospels, and they do so for a reason: Jesus is absolutely unequivocal about the realities of this spiritual conflict. The devil is no fool. He is a shape-shifting deceiver who will use any means at his disposal to sow discord, especially amongst the children of light. It will not necessarily be as dramatic as a public exorcism such as in today’s Gospel, but the same forces are at work. Tensions, jealousies, our own flaws of character, a broken photocopier, tiredness, a momentary lapse in concentration, the wrong hymn tune, fear, anxiety, illness, the carefully-nurtured memory of a wrong we suffered many years ago....the list is long.

Yesterday morning we had a PCC meeting in church and quite a lot of hard work to do. The Gospel text for the mass beforehand was St Luke 15, the story of the Prodigal Son. It seemed a good thing to read again the

heart of the text at the beginning of the meeting, as a way of reminding us that, in amongst the myriad of complex responsibilities and weighty decisions, we are a band of brothers and sisters in Christ, united in love and striving to hear God’s word to us at this time. Hear the familiar text from Luke again with me:

*And when the young man came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.*

In amongst all the complexity and puzzlement of the scripture texts today there is a key, hidden at the end of today’s Gospel: we are called to *hear the Word of God and keep it*. That’s it, the long and the short of it. From this simple act flows everything else: good and upright lives, lives that radiate the light and love of Christ, lives from which fear is ultimately banished. Lives which, in amongst all the complexity and puzzlement of the affairs and challenges of the wider world, are held fast in the love of God.

I wonder what *word* the father spoke to the prodigal son at that extraordinary moment of reconciliation? We have no record, only of what he said to the servants, which in fact probably said quite a lot to his son. Here’s an exercise, some homework: later today, I would like you to imagine what that missing word or words from the father to the son might be, because they might just be that same elusive Word of God which you and I are called are called to hear afresh this Lent and, in so hearing, keep. Amen.