



Homily for Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year C

The 50th Anniversary Jubilee of Fr Michael Lambert AA

The Prodigal Son

The story of the prodigal son is the story of a life journey.

I was remembering my journey back to my old school but this time I was going to say Mass. Fr Andrew and I with my parents drove to the Convent, for Mass at 11.00am, more or less the time it is now! The first thing I noticed was how small the buildings were as I had hardly ever had a chance to go back after leaving at 10, to go to our Assumptionist School, the Becket, rival to St Michael's when it was where the Police Station now is. I expect you have all had this experience! By the time you get to the stage of celebrating your Jubilee of 50 years in anything at all, you become very aware of how perspectives change with time. You revisit places you have been before and they seem different, changed in some ways. Of course, it is always you yourself who have changed. It is an important lesson and one which I need to keep in mind constantly and be sensitive to; we are not so much human beings as human becomings!

As I had been an MC for many years at my home parish, in the Study Houses I was in, so I managed the High Mass quite well. It was so good to see the Sisters who taught me: Sister Edward, Sr Raphael and the Headmistress, Sister Benignus and my great friend Sister Philomena. How important it is to give thanks and appreciation to all those who were important to us over the various phases of our lives! That is why I was so delighted to see so many of my friends from over the years, who found time to come and share in my Anniversary! Some of you are here again today – real gluttons for punishment, hearing me twice!!

Today though, it is you my Sisters and Brothers of the parish, that I wish to thank and give praise for the great support you have offered to me over the past 16 years, to help me move further in opening myself up and hopefully getting rid of the vestiges of overbearing and conservative views that I have had. You have helped me to become more fully my vision of being Michael who is a Priest – NOT a Priest who is Michael. It's a lifelong process I can assure you, so thanks for what you are doing for me now!

Unlike the prodigal son, whose friends faded away when his money ran out, my friends have stuck around. (Well, I never had any money!!) It was delightful to see so many friends yesterday. One thing I have learned is that I have to be careful to keep up friendship. It is very important not to be consumed by your job – keep your precious relationships going! It gives a much needed balance to your life.

When I think back to all the Parishes in which I have served, I have always been amazed at how each one is so different but essentially the same: so I have had quite a few of my sharp corners knocked off me and empowered into new areas of life! And, just as in the story we have heard today, God's mercy toward me has been that I have been able to journey towards a growing realisation of my basic mission, of recognising that I – and all of us, are redeemed sinners: we need to work at forgiving ourselves for what we have done!

And as for working on the family farm, at the parish of Brockley I developed a strong interest in visiting and meeting people in their own homes. My pastoral duties have also taken me to the land of the sick – of hospital chaplaincy. At Bethnal Green, E2, I served a similar length of time, as Assistant Priest and Parish Priest twice. I had to develop a strong sense of patience and understanding as my room was situated over the Bar of the Social Club which used the Hall! Times of joy, mixed with frustration, but also at times wonderfully pastoral, in unexpected ways. Hence my need to keep my eyes open and be ready with a listening ear! It is here that I developed a strong interest in Hospital Chaplaincy. We had three hospitals in the parish and two others within ministering distance. Sadly all are now closed and the care of people from our Parish was moved elsewhere.

Caring for the sick and dying patients is a wonderfully rewarding, if challenging, calling to fulfill! I have been a Chaplain off and on for most of my time here in Hitchin, where I have been able to adapt our liturgy for those who are ill and make of them something more pastoral and warm. It is so important to take people where they are and walk with them as far as is necessary. It is always a challenge to discern when it is important to step back and allow people to feel empowered to move on to carry on. Hence my strong interest and work in counselling and accompanying people in their Journey of life. It is something I hope to continue when I am retired: a vocation of presence and accompaniment!

My three years in Zimbabwe, or Rhodesia as it was when I was there, was a powerful experience, working at St Mary's Cathedral in Bulawayo, reaching out to young people for their RE formation in State Schools; working with catechists and all who supported Schools, for their professional and personal development. Isinga is a Youth Centre I was very involved with setting up. We started with just a derelict site, with disparate buildings and worked up to a Centre which provided training for young people in various skills, a nursery and facilities to draw together young people of all races to work and share together. My last activity before I returned was to arrange for a weekend where we all gathered to reflect and pray on the Church's Social Teachings: nearly 100 camped and took part. Where there is a will there is a way! Hence my desire to draw people in to do what they feel happy doing to serve the Lord and their sisters and brothers in Christ.

It was Charlton where I became aware more of the importance of empowering people and giving them the confidence to become involved in parish life, in ways with which they were comfortable. It is here that I became more aware of the Parish Council and its work. Perhaps, like the younger son in the gospel, we all work on the family farm?

One thing we learn from this story is the importance of welcome – the stepping out to meet people as they arrive. It was at Charlton that I also became very aware of the importance of welcoming people into the Church as they arrived for Mass. We had quite a varied team: going from a little girl of 5 or 6 to people who were grandparents. This is what inspired me to do the best I could to be present before as well as after Mass and now that I have been here 16 years, it is so good to be able to discern new faces, either as visitors or new parishioners, hence our wonderful Welcome pack! You are all so important for the life of our Church!

At Aspley, in Nottingham, I did much to build up our Servers. It was they who presented me with the T Shirt, which I wore at our famous “Cycle Ride” for PHASE, here in Hitchin in January. It stated the fact that I was still good after all these years. Here it is!

After 35 years of the priesthood, I arrived here, in Hitchin. Here, I was very much wanting to champion liberation and to empower people into realising their gifts and talents and recognising that we are all redeemed sinners! Thankfully in this year of Jubilee for me, it is the wonderful word **mercy** that is offered to us to seize and make our own.

In response to the Pope’s Jubilee of Mercy, in this diocese we are working to implement God’s mercy in the world. In this part of the world, Hitchin, we are reaching out in trust and confidence to you who are our co-workers and share co-responsibility for our parish to help us. It is in trust and confidence that we can do that, as so many seeds have been sown over the years I have been here, we have so many outstanding people who are an inspiration and enablers of so much more life. It is time now for you to feel liberated to take the initiative and forge ahead as God’s people, with the blessing and encouragement of us priests. The Lord’s sense of justice is transformed and transfigured through His mercy which enables us to recognise where we are, see what we have done, the glorious reality that we need to forgive ourselves to seize His mercy and reach out to others! We have a wonderful Parish, reaching out in so many wonderful and enriching ways, to our co-parishioners, but also well beyond our town into all areas of the world, to which we have been called in many ways.

We have upgraded the plant in many wonderful ways, we are now embarking on a new phase and transforming the Parish site to be a real hub of activity and also reaching out in charity to others, with Caritas Westminster, looking to set one up in our midst. Our Parochial structures have developed and built on past achievements, our PPC is really a hub of action and sharing responsibility for all facets of Parish life. We have won several awards for our concern for good standing of our world, with its implications of promoting living simply, the care of our world and its environment and we are in many ways a beacon for others to draw strength from to take a new direction where they are based. Long may this blossom and bloom! Our Pastoral and Sacramental outreach has grown enormously, with a very impressive number of Catechists, so give so much time and energy, to the

great benefit and strengthening of us all, as we journey together. It is so good to see so many volunteers, fulfilling many areas of responsibility, with great dedication and commitment. Our Building Team, our Maintenance Team, our Gardening Team, have all emerged of themselves in many ways, but with much foresight and organisation. Our Visiting Team and Bereavement Team do so much work behind the scenes. The Communication Log, the emails and texts which circulate, like arteries through the body, to pass on news, share concerns and calls for help. The Faith Development Team, is going to take on a new lease of life, with the work being done for Proclaim 15 and outreach through the use of the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy, which are so necessary as we live the Season of Lent: fasting from what takes away our life and feasting on these works, to strengthen us and build up further outreach to others.

I can now publish to you what are the three projects that the parish working party for this initiative have agreed: the two main ones are: Firstly, to work more closely with the PHASE Project about which we heard a fortnight ago and encourage our Schools to take it on board too as well as providing venues for meetings and use of our other facilities.

Secondly, we want to reach out to people who are at the end of life and to their carers with practical and spiritual help. Alongside this, we are also looking to set up a group of housebound parishioners to pray for the relaunch of the Faith Development Helpline for those who have become distant from the Church. We are all involved in each other's faith development!

Thirdly, adult faith formation will get a boost. We are still looking into what is needed but support, especially for those who have recently joined the church, as adults, will be made available. Watch this space!

It is in the light of this situation that I close with words from one of the Aotearoa Psalms called "Just suppose":

"Just suppose this wonderful God so totally, crazily in love with us first becomes one with His beloved,
taking on a human likeness...

Suppose that the only ultimate truth is that God is the source and destiny of every soul.

Suppose that everything we are, all our light and shade, our sin and celebration belongs wholly in God's love.

Suppose no one is ever lost to that love.

Wouldn't that be Good News?"

The crazy love of God can be made visible in this parish – I have seen it happening with my own eyes over all these years. His mercy, so beautifully described in the Gospel today, can be a reality, if we make it so.