

Sermon for Lent 4 27.03.22 Lk 15 1-3, 11b-322 Cor 16-21 by Revd Carol Harley

May my words be true to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

How often we find ourselves saying, '*If only*' '*If only* I hadn't done this, said that; *if only* I had tried harder, taken action sooner, *if only*' The earliest story in the Bible relates to an incident like this. We can imagine Eve saying, '*If only* I hadn't given in to temptation', and Adam thinking, '*If only* I'd asked where she'd picked that apple'.

Today's Gospel records an '*If only*' story told by Jesus. We can picture the younger son, broke, hungry and alone, thinking, '*If only* I had stayed on the farm, not wasted my money and mixed with the riff raff. Like Adam and Eve and countless others – *like us* – he had made a mess of things and was filled with bitter remorse.

It is rarely possible to 'put the clock back', so is there any remedy for the guilt and regret we feel when we have gone astray? There's something we can learn from what Jesus told us about the younger son. He 'came to his senses', admitted his mistakes, returned home to ask his father's forgiveness, and offered to make amends by working on the farm as a slave. If we have wronged someone we ought to follow his example. We will certainly need to turn to God, our Father, to ask his forgiveness. The good news is that if we are sincerely sorry and want to make amends, we have the words of St Paul in today's Epistle which assure us that, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding people's wrong doing against them'. We are offered a fresh start. 'For anyone united to Christ, there is a new creation; the old order has gone, a new order has already begun'.

When young, on a sea-side holiday, I would write my name or some message in the damp sand and then watched as the tide came in and the words disappeared forever.

When we're burdened with the '*if only*' type of remorse, we might find it helpful to go to an imaginary beach, write down whatever we have done wrong in the sand and then watch as the incoming tide washes our guilt away - for ever. As St John wrote, 'If we confess our sins, he is just and may be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every kind of wrongdoing.

It's not only our wrongdoing which prompts us to think, '*if only*'. How are we to deal with all the other regrets which haunt our lives? For instance, we may think of missed opportunities and wrong choices – '*if only* I'd worked harder at school, chosen a different career, been a better wife, husband, partner; *if only* I'd not left it too late to make that visit, write that letter, make that phone call; *if only* I'd done more to help other people, and achieved something worthwhile in my life' - the list is endless. It's important to recognise that the phrase '*if only*' is extremely negative and disabling.

The writer, Arthur Gordon, tells of a time in his life when everything in his life was going wrong. He arranged to meet an old friend, a psychiatrist, and he told him all of his troubles. He blamed no-one but himself for the wrong decisions, mistakes and neglected opportunities in his life. His friend listened in silence and then asked, 'Have you noticed how often you use two of the saddest words in any language – '*if only*'? The trouble is', he continued, 'those words keep you looking backward instead of forward, and in the end they can be an excuse for not trying anymore.' 'What do you suggest, then?' Arthur asked. 'Mentally strike out '*if only*' and substitute '*next time*'. Learn from your mistakes so that *next time* you don't repeat them or, at least do a bit better.

Don't waste energy regretting the past. The '*next time*' is always a new opportunity. Say to yourself, '*Next time* it will be different. Try it and see. Now I must be off home.'

But what of those situations when there will be no '*next time*'?

We may find ourselves in the wrong job but unable to change it, the death of a friend prevents us apologising for any misunderstanding, poor health prevents our plans for retirement.

I wonder, was Jesus ever tempted to say, '*If only ...*'? There was one occasion when his words may have been taken in this way.

On his last journey to Jerusalem, 'when he came in sight of the city, he wept over it and said, '*If only* you had known this day the way that leads to peace! But now it is hidden from your sight'.

If only the people had understood his message, but most hadn't, and there would be no next time, this was to be his final visit. In his place we might have thought, 'I've had enough, I'll go back to my old job, at least a carpenter can see the results of his work.' However, Jesus didn't give way to despair, but continued on the road which led to the cross. He accepted the situation and, as we might say, 'made the best of a bad job' – taking control of what was inevitable, but turning negative circumstances to positive ones. His crucifixion seemed to mark the total failure of his mission, to be just another example of pointless suffering. Yet his defeat in death was transformed into victory on the day of his resurrection.

In a book I've got and read some years ago called, 'When Bad Things Happen to Good People', the author speaks of suffering as 'an opportunity to experience evil and change it into good'. This is what Christ did. There will be times when we can't see any '*next time*', but, nevertheless we need to take from it what good we can. So, this might involve thinking more positively about the job we have already, working harder ourselves to improve a relationship, making a visit, phoning, or writing a letter sooner rather than later, finding another way to serve the community, using our experience of suffering to give sensitive support to others, and so on. Although no situation is ever repeated exactly, others will come along when, by God's grace, we will avoid the wrong-doings, mistakes and missed opportunities of the past, take all possible good from the unchangeable present, do better the next time, and move on to meet the future.

A prayer attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr.

'God, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can. And the wisdom to know the difference'.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.