

Our theme for this morning's meditation is ' "God has promised forgiveness to the penitent"'. Today is also marked as a Sunday when we remember those who are involved in the healing ministry of the Church and pray for them. In the Old Testament reading taken from the book of Ezekiel the Lord warns the people of Israel saying that, 'when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity he shall die for it; for the iniquity he has committed he shall die. When a wicked man turns away from wickedness he committed and does what is lawful and right, he shall save his life.' Therefore, the Lord challenges the house of Israel to repent and turn from all their sin which they had committed against the Lord and to get for themselves a new heart and a new spirit. He says he has no pleasure in the death of anyone, and so challenges everyone to repent and live.

In the gospel reading we noticed that Jesus was mingling with Tax Collectors and sinners. The Pharisees and the scribes murmured saying, 'this man receives sinners and eats with them.' Jesus then goes on to tell them a story about a man who had two sons. In this parable the younger son asks for the father's inheritance. Asking for the father's inheritance when he was alive was to wish that he was dead. Secondly, here it is the younger son who is demanding that his share be given. Normally he would be rebuked severely. However, here the father generously gives whatever he has asked for. The son wanted to be free from parental restraint and do whatever he wanted to, no controls, no boundaries. All his wealth is wasted in expensive and wild living. His new found wealth gave him raw power that he could do whatever he wanted and get away with it. Very soon he lost all that he had and a great famine arose in that country and he was in want. He joined together with one of the citizens of that country who sent him to the fields to take care of his pigs. He longs to feed himself with the pods that the pigs were eating. The pods were bitter and without nourishment. The picture is of death and total rejection. At this point he has hit rock bottom. Rock bottom experiences very often make us come to our senses and make us face reality. He begins to think about his father's hired servants who had enough food to spare and here he was starving to death. He wanted to go back to his father and tell him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son make me like one of your hired men.' By being made a hired servant the younger son wants to make up for what was lost. He wants to save himself without grace. Repentance is the capacity to forgo pride and accept grace.

The prodigal son sets off towards his father. While he was still far away his father saw him and he was filled with compassion. He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. In ancient culture a noble man never runs anywhere with his flowing robes. To do so is humiliating and was undignified for an elderly man to run. The father knows that the boy will be ridiculed as he makes his way through the village. Instead of the son being humiliated, it is the father who

takes on the humiliation. The father makes the reconciliation at the edge of the village. The son therefore enters the village under the protective care of the father. Rather than experiencing the ruthless hostility he deserves, the son experiences an unexpected visible demonstration of love. The father saw, was filled with compassion, ran, put his arms round him, hugged him, and kissed him. This love is too profound for words only acts will do. The son knows that we cannot offer any solution for their broken relationship. He understands that restoration of this relationship must be a pure gift from his father. The prodigal son repented and confessed that he had sinned and was not worthy to be called his son. However, the father robes his son and put on his signet ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. All these show that he is fully accepted as a son. Finally, a celebratory feast is call for.

The elder son comes home and hears the music and dancing and is told of the return of his younger brother. However, the elder brother finds it difficult to accept the home coming of his younger brother. The point of the parable is that everybody needs healing and true healing can only come when we accept the offer of grace and confess our unworthiness. Whatever healing ministry that we are involved in, God has called us to reflect His love and compassion unconditionally so that others may truly come to know Christ. It is the love of God that compels us to reach out to others. But more than any physical healing, it is our spiritual relationship which needs to be restored with Jesus Christ. Once we do this, God will give us the power to minister and to be ministered unto.

Paul Swarup

10<sup>th</sup> February 2013