

St Marc Grenoble
Sunday 27th March, 2022
4th Sunday of Lent, Mothering Sunday
Luke 15: 1 - 3, 11b - 32 (MSG)
'Lost and Found'

Good Morning:

Welcome everyone, both in Church and, like me, joining on Zoom.

It's good to be back in Grenoble, but frustrating I've tested positive for Covid, since arriving home.

I want to thank everyone who was praying for us while we were coping with my Mother's funeral, and the sorting out, after her death. It was really encouraging to know we were being prayerfully supported.

Let's Pray

This morning's Gospel is fascinating, but before I kick off, I'd love to hear your thoughts. Please help me by sharing your feelings, or reflections, or even just share some words that struck you while you were listening.

OK, let's have a look: We mustn't miss the first 3 verses Ernest read from the start of the chapter. They provide a context, or frame, for this word picture. Many of the things described in the story are culturally outrageous; things that should never have happened in '1st C Jewish society'.

For a son to ask for his share of the estate was like saying 'Dad, I wish you'd drop dead!' Leaving home and family was bad enough! (Culturally, it was the older brother's duty to stop him, possibly even knock some sense into him). But, for the father agreeing to such suggestions was unheard of, and would almost have been regarded as negligent.

But, the story continues with the Dad dividing the estate – meaning the older son took possession of the family farm, his share would have been twice that of the younger son's, and the father would lose all control. – In modern terms, he'd have moved into a granny flat!

The younger son went abroad, and proceeded to squander his fortune – in modern terms, it would be on drugs, fast cars and loose women – all the things parents dread their children doing. But, dynamically multiplied by a good Jewish boy, defiling himself by doing it all among Gentiles.

Before long, the inevitable happened and, in a time of famine – or economic slump – the young man's money ran out. He ended up on the street, without a roof over his head, hungry, looking for charity among foreigners.

You don't have to go far to see plenty of people in that situation; and some of

you will know similar experiences only too well.

But, to make the story culturally impossible, this Jewish boy ended up working with pigs; not only unpleasant but, the ultimate religious defilement.

The pivotal point in the story is when, up to his knees in pig muck, we're told in v.17 "He came to his senses" and realised the lowest of his Dad's farmhands was better off than he was.

He resolved to go home, eat 'humble pie', seek his Dad's forgiveness and ask for a job as a hired hand. At least he would get three square meals a day, and somewhere dry and warm to sleep. So, he set off to walk home...

Days later, as he shuffled over the horizon of the family farm – probably with the soles of his shoes flapping – his Dad spotted him! ... Why?

Because every day since he'd left, his Dad had been watching out, with the never failing hope that one day he would return. (I experienced a similar feeling, always looking out for a daughter I hadn't seen for years.)

Recognising his lost son's silhouette on the horizon, the old man, his heart pumping, tucked his robe in his belt and ran headlong towards his son. Something it was unheard of for old men to do ... Why did he run? ...

Probably for two reasons. First, he was overjoyed to see his son; second, because in that culture the boy's religious misdemeanours warranted him being stoned to death on sight – but the old man reckoned, they would be unlikely to stone his son with him in the way.

As the overjoyed father embraced the, no-doubt stinking, son in his arms, the boy started reciting the plea for forgiveness he'd been rehearsing throughout the long journey home. But the father, no doubt with tears flowing down his face, swept aside his son's contrition and called the servants to treat the boy like royalty – like one returned from the dead!

He called for his son to be given the best clothes, new shoes, and the family signet ring. A party fit for a returning war hero began!

Can you imagine the scene? – I can; I used to pray daily for that sort of reunion with my own daughter. No bitterness, no recrimination, no questions – just the delight and forgiveness, borne of reunification.

But, we must realise that beautiful story actually describes the way God treats each of us, who have wandered away, when we come back to Him. I know – because I've experienced it myself.

In my mid forties, after more than 20 years of turning my back on God, I realised the love of Jesus was what was missing from my life.

And, despite my years of ignoring Him, He welcomed me back, with exactly the same open and loving arms.

What of the older son, and his response? He refused to join the party. Still harbouring the resentment of being left to look after the family farm. He'd had no chance to leave home; and resented the fact that he'd been saddled with the task of maintaining the family business, and looking after his father.

Reluctantly, he'd always been the one expected to do the right thing, and didn't see why his rebellious little brother should come back and be treated as if he owned the place; enjoying treatment and privileges the older brother never had the chance to enjoy.

Despite his father's plea for him to join the party he would not. – He wanted to feel sorry for himself. Maybe, he also felt guilty.

In that culture it should have been the elder brother who remonstrated with his younger sibling in the first place. The fact he didn't lift a finger, suggests he didn't have a good relationship with his father either.

What does this story tell us about our own broken relationships?

We need to know that our God – portrayed by the father in Jesus' story – always welcomes us back to Him, whenever we choose to repent – that means turn back. There are no recriminations.

But, as we've seen, there are two responses – either we accept the forgiveness bought for us by Jesus, dying in our place on the cross, and go to the party; or, stay outside, with the unquenchable pain of bitterness.

We must choose! As well as choosing how we respond to God, we must also choose how we treat our own brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, friends and neighbours, when there's a rift between us.

Either we treat them in the same way Jesus treats us, – and enjoy the joy of sharing forgiveness; or we bear the lasting scars of bitterness and rejection.

They also have similar choices, which sadly we cannot make for them. If they persist in choosing bitterness, we may still have to share the pain. I hear of so many situations in families where that is a harsh reality.

All we can do in those cases, is to bring them to Jesus in our prayers, and seek His healing and forgiveness for them. It isn't easy, but Jesus, who knows all about the pain and suffering of rejection, is always there to help.

So, as I close: **Let's Pray**