

Luke 15: 11-32 Saint Marc, Grenoble 14.4.24

Over the four weeks that I shall be with you we shall be looking at 4 passages which are fairly well known, but will try and look at them from different angles, to see if the different view can add something to our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Today's passage from Luke 15 is well known as the Prodigal, or the Lost, Son. Many of us will have been inspired (and even converted) by it as it reveals God, the Father's, incredible love for us even when we mess up. (When I Googled the parable, this book – still available second hand on Amazon was one of the first images to come up!)

When so many of us find such value in the story of the disobedient son, it comes as something of a surprise to find that Jesus told this parable for a completely different reason.

At the beginning of the chapter Luke tells us that: "Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering round to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them."¹ Jesus had been teaching about how living in the Kingdom of God turns so many commonly held values on their head. Amongst those attracted to this message were people who felt excluded and condemned by the religious leaders. Throughout their lives they had been told that they were worthless and that there was no place for them amongst God's people – but when Jesus spoke to them, they discovered a new hope – that there was a place in God's heart for them – so no wonder they followed Jesus and listened intently.

In contrast to the eyes of love through which Jesus sees people -the religious leaders labelled them according to their behaviour and position in society, and criticized Jesus for encouraging them. In response Jesus told three parables involving loss and celebration:

In the first parable a shepherd with 100 sheep loses one. He recklessly abandons the 99 to hunt for the missing sheep. When he finds it, he is so happy he gathers all his friends and neighbours together to celebrate. This, says Jesus, is God's value: I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.²

The second parable is of a woman with 10 silver coins who loses one. She cleans and tidies the whole house until she finds it, then again calls all her friends and neighbours to join in the celebration that she has found that which was lost. Jesus again says: ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents³

To hear what Jesus is teaching in the third parable, we enter into the story, not through the younger son, nor through the Father, but through the experience of the older son.

He came from a fairly well-off farming family. They had servants to help, but there would still have been a lot of hard work for him to do. He knew that when his father died he would inherit the land and continue

¹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised \(1984\)](#), electronic edition. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Lk 15:1–2.

² [The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised \(1984\)](#), electronic edition. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Lk 15:7.

³ [The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised \(1984\)](#), electronic edition. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Lk 15:10.

the family farm. The way inheritance worked, for a father with 2 sons, was that a third of the value of moveable goods and money was considered to be owned by each of them, with the older son receiving his father's portion on top of his own when the father died. It was common for the second son to receive his inheritance, not when his father died, but when he married and went to live nearby.

You can imagine his surprise when his younger brother, with no marriage in sight, demanded his inheritance early and went to live, not nearby, but in a foreign land. In a culture where family ties were so important, it is hard to underestimate the pain of rejection that he and his father must have felt.

I don't know how much you hear about the British Royal family in France but in British media, and in the States, there has been a fascination about the relationship between the King's 2 sons, William and Harry. There is a long tradition in the monarchy that to ensure the continuation of the line, the King should have 2 sons - often referred to as "The Heir and the Spare!" Until William had his own children, Harry was on the substitutes bench in case anything happened to William. William and Harry have had a tempestuous relationship and, now that Harry is no longer needed as a substitute heir, he has chosen to live in a distant land - America - and has made public some of their disagreements. Now, so we are told William never wants Harry to return or to be part of his life.

So in the parable, the older brother (Let's call him William) has heard from messengers that his brother (let's call him Harry) is spending all his money on wild living and betraying the family name and honour. You can imagine him telling his family and friends how angry he is and how glad that Harry is so far away.

Fast forward several years and William has been hard at work in the fields and is returning home having been away for several days. As he gets close, he realises something is different. He can hear music and celebration going on. What could this mean? Is there a birthday or anniversary that he has forgotten? He sends a servant on ahead to find out. Nothing had prepared him for the shocking news that Harry was back and his Father had laid on a party and killed their most special animal - the one reserved for an extra-special occasion - to celebrate his return.

How do you think William is feeling? He goes into a sulk and refuses to go back to the house but stay out in the fields. If Harry is there he doesn't want to be. The poor Father comes out to plead with him. But William just pours out all his resentment - "I have always been loyal, I've done what you wanted, I have worked hard for you and yet you haven't even killed a goat to celebrate me being here. But Harry has come back after turning his back on us and wasting all our money on prostitutes, and you kill the prize calf and hold a massive party for him - I'm not having any part of it".

But, says his father, "Don't you understand, I had to celebrate because I had thought my son was dead and now he is alive and back with us. Please let go of your anger and come back in to join the celebration - don't stay here on the outside?"

What did William do? The answer is, we don't know! Jesus leaves the story there because he invites us, his listeners, to make the story our own and provide our own ending. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were being invited to see that their attitudes to those who were coming to Jesus they were putting themselves outside of God's celebration but they could still choose to change their attitude and come in.

The question for us to consider is what thoughts, or actions, might put us outside of God's celebration:

1. Often, when people become Christians they seem to have an experience of the richness of God's love which is much more vibrant than the experience of those of us older in the faith. For those of us seeking God's blessings daily and weekly, this doesn't seem fair or right. We can stay in the field by dismissing it as immaturity or excessive; or we can allow their enthusiasm to lead us into the celebration of God's love

2. Healing: It has been my experience (and I would argue biblical teaching) that most significant healing I have witnessed has been at the boundaries of faith, when Christians pray for non-Christians, thus pointing them to the presence of the Kingdom. Like many of you who have faced sorrows I feel the sense of injustice – I want to join the elder brother in saying “haven’t I toiled and laboured for you for many years yet.....” This is still a struggle for me – but hope I am now strong enough to join the celebration of other people’s healing – although I expect it will still be a struggle for some time.
3. When we become Christians, we bring our culture and personality with us. I have seen many churches where they want to bring new people in, but only if they fit in with the church as it is. A Church that is entering into God’s celebration will also be a church that adapts to new members. My last parish said they wanted to reach out to families in the area. So one of the first things I did was to turn some of the pews round to make a carpeted children’s area. Even though we had no children at the time, any families that came in needed to see that they were welcome.

I would like to finish with a story:

Now I am retired and go to a church which had faced considerable change. The older members of the church had some very set ways of doing things and the church was declining. A new minister came in and encouraged new families to come in – some of whom had very active children! The older members realised that they had the choice of the elder brother – were they going to live in resentment of the change and become marginalised – or embrace the change and join the celebration. To their credit, they chose to come in from the fields and join the celebration. Now, when children run up and down the aisle and make a noise, they smile and rejoice – recognising the signs of God at work