

Readings: Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:11-32

Sermon

Here is a story about two sons. Jesus signals that right at the start: 'There was once a man who had two sons.' We call it the 'parable of the prodigal son' as though there's only one son who matters, and calling him 'prodigal', which means free-spending, manages to focus attention on possibly the least important aspect of his conduct. However, it is true that the younger son is the central focus of the story. But the question that the story leaves us with isn't about him, it is about the elder son: or rather it is for the elder son. The issue for the elder son is his attitude to his younger brother.

There is one key sentence that is repeated. The father says to his servants when he gives the orders for the celebration: 'This son of mine was dead and has come to life again, he was lost and has been found.' And at the end of the story he says to his other son, 'We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life again, and he was lost and has been found'. There is a difference between those two sentences, of course: 'this son of mine/this brother of yours.' The elder son has just called his brother 'this son of yours' as though he had nothing to do with him: subtly and politely his father points out his mistake and tries to bring him to look at his brother as a brother who has been lost and is found.

A parable in the Gospels is never just a story. It is not even a story with a meaning. It is a question looking for an answer, a question that is addressed to someone whom it concerns. According to Luke, Jesus told this story because the Pharisees and teachers of the law were complaining, 'This man is welcoming sinners and eating with them.' The question is to them: are you willing to welcome those whom God welcomes?' But even for Luke that can't be the end of it: he was writing for a mainly Gentile audience in the wider Mediterranean world, where there weren't any Pharisees or teachers of the law. And we are still reading his work today. What does it mean for us? What questions does it leave us with? How do we answer it?

Let's look at the story in more detail. The younger son is a most unsatisfactory son. We have to think about the story to see just how unsatisfactory he is. He starts by asking his father to give him that share of the property that would fall to him after his father's death according to the law. A law in the book of Deut suggests that that would be one-third of it, with the other two-thirds going to the elder son. So the father hands over the whole property, which would consist almost entirely of agricultural land, to his sons, and the younger one sells his share. So he's started by taking a one-third bite out of the ancestral inheritance: there is only two-thirds left to hand on to their descendants in an age when bad harvests and high taxes could more easily ruin a smaller

property. You see why his brother makes a point of saying 'he has eaten up your livelihood with prostitutes'. This is the 'sin against you' that he confesses to his father.

Then having exchanged his inheritance for money, he leaves. No more help from him in running the farm. No loving and helpful company for his father and brother, and his mother if she is still alive—she isn't mentioned, but I'll come back to the implications of the story for Mothering Sunday in a minute. They are all of them simply abandoned, and it seems there is no communication from him till he comes back.

Then how does he spend that irreplaceable inheritance? On what the wonderful KJV calls 'riotous living'—'he wasted his substance on riotous living': in other words, enjoying himself without restraint: sex, booze, gambling, expensive food, expensive clothes, the lot. A lot of this would be 'sinning against heaven', which he also confesses. All of it is an irresponsible use of what he should have regarded as a sacred trust.

He comes to his senses only when the money runs out and he hits rock bottom looking after pigs—unclean animals for Jews—and so hungry he could eat the tough bean pods the pigs are given. So he goes back—it is all he can do. And he prepares a little speech for his father. You do wonder whether the repentance he expresses in this speech is sincere, or just a ploy to get his father's sympathy.

We'll come back to him in a minute. Meanwhile, by contrast, his brother is a model son. He is industrious and dutiful. His hard work is keeping the family farm going even after his brother has stripped away a third of it. He has always obeyed his father and done what he has wanted. By this time he has probably married and is bringing up a family to carry on the farm while his brother is flitting from one woman to another. A very satisfactory son.

That is, until the turning point of the story, when the father welcomes back the younger son. He doesn't even let him finish his little speech. Maybe he doesn't even hear it. One does get the impression that the question that concerned us just now, whether his repentance was sincere, doesn't worry him at all. Nor does he ask what made him come back, whether it was just desperation. What if it was? What matters to him is that the son that he loves is back, that 'he was dead and has come to life, was lost and is found'.

As I noted just now, there is no mother in this story. But the father in truth is playing the mother's role. In the average romantic tearjerker you would expect the mother to be showing all the love and compassion and not worrying about what the son had been doing and whether he was truly repentant, while the

father would be saying he's got to show he's sorry and work off what he owes us. But not a bit of it! He welcomes his son back unconditionally. And he wants and needs his elder son to join in his joyful welcome for the one who was dead and is alive again, was lost and has been found. That is the question that the story ends with.

So far, the signs are not good. For the first time in his life, the elder son is refusing to do what his father wants. The obedient son has become the disobedient son—disobedient because he has not understood his father's love and compassion. And maybe one begins to wonder whether all his dutifulness came out of love for his father and desire to please him, or rather was just toeing a moral line to make himself feel superior to his ne'er-do-well brother. His very obedience may now be betraying him into disobedience.

As we all realise, the story is really about God, just as it is equally surely about us. We know that however far the country that we wander to, we can't wander beyond the reach of God's love. But we can refuse God's love, wall ourselves off from it, stop our ears to the voice of God's motherly compassion. That is what the younger son in the story does, by taking his share of what should be a shared inheritance and walking away. We all do this when we want to do something that we know is not right and not in accord with God's will.

But the smallest move we make back in God's direction, the smallest chink we leave to God's love, God will seize on: just as the father in the story sees his son coming from a long way off and runs to kiss him. We don't have to make a formal speech, a formal prayer of repentance. There is no formula that you have to follow to be reconciled with God, because as Paul says, it's God in Christ who is doing the reconciling, not us. And actually in the two other stories that Jesus tells in Luke 15, the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, there is no question of the lost item having to make a move: the shepherd or the housewife does it all. But in this last and longest story there is allowance for the sinner's own free agency: we do have free will and if we really want to walk away, there is nothing to stop us.

But the elder brother has also walled himself off, and far more completely, from his father's love, because he is unable to share it. I don't suppose there are many people here that are tempted into the younger brother's 'riotous living', but there may be more who are more like the elder brother, more like the Pharisees and teachers of the law that Luke takes as the examples in Jesus' day, because this is a constant danger for religious people. We have got where we are by being faithful to what God asks of us, we've turned up at church Sunday after Sunday, read our Bibles and said our prayers, maybe taught in the Sunday School and become elders. Some of us have even

heard a call to the ministry. Obviously we must be first in God's love rather than someone who has lived a pretty dodgy life and doesn't really know what being a Christian is all about.

Wrong!—as if you didn't know! Of course you knew that God's love is for everyone equally, just as the father in the story loves both his sons. But it's always so easy for us to be jealous of someone who seems to have wangled a good position without putting the effort into it that we feel we have. Not only that, but we may feel that we have nothing much in common with some people who turn up on the church's doorstep, and with the greatest good will we feel awkward talking to them.

Hearing the reading from one of Paul's letters to the Christians at Corinth just now, and thinking back on it, there is one thing you might be a bit puzzled by. He says: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Fine, Paul was a missionary with the message of the Gospel, which is the message of reconciliation. But why does he then go on, speaking to these Christians, 'we plead with you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled with God.' These are people who have heard the message, believed in Christ, formed a new church excited by the richness of God's gift of his Holy Spirit. Surely they are already reconciled and don't need to be asked to be reconciled?

The parable of the two sons points to the answer. Being reconciled with God has to mean being reconciled with each other, because it means sharing in God's motherly love, and extending to others that same generous and compassionate welcome that God has shown to us. And we are always slipping back from the fullness of our enfolding in God's love, because we are jealous, because it's too much effort, because we are afraid of what welcoming others might mean to us. So being reconciled to God isn't a one-off, it's ongoing work, new every morning. That's why we have a prayer of confession at the beginning of each Sunday service, so that we can be reconciled once again with God before we start.

One thing more. The parable of the two sons is an invitation to rejoicing. 'We have to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found.' There's a great feast in progress: the fatted calf has been killed, there's music and dancing, this is probably going to be an all-night affair. And this is a picture of what our life in Christ ought to be like. We celebrate because in Christ God has reconciled the world to God's self; because high and low, male and female, rich and poor, black and white, even those that everyone else sees as hopelessly lost and has given up for dead, all have been welcomed into the warm

encompassing bosom of our redeeming God. And so 'we have to celebrate and be glad', and that I hope is what we do every Sunday.

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