

Prodigal

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The marvellous parable of the Prodigal Son, or the Hard-Hearted older brother, or the Forgiving Father is rightly called the gospel, the good news, within the Gospel of Luke. It's a story in two parts – the story of the younger brother and the story of his elder brother – bound together by the story of the steadfastly loving and forgiving father.

It begins, "There was a man who had two sons." Before it is anything else, it is a story about a family, and in this parable the family is broken. Before mercy and forgiveness and even inclusion can come, the first struggle for any broken family is with the memories and mistakes and regrets from the past. Think of the battles between brothers, sons, sisters, daughters. No human family is free of sibling rivalry, like Cain and Abel, or parental resentment like King Saul towards Jonathan. The focus of the parable is the father. It's odd that a story about the power of mercy and grace is commonly known by a negative title, the *Prodigal* son, not the loving father. Despite the fact that the story ends in a celebration. This is a story, a parable, about love and forgiveness and joy.

Before the story starts, note the context. The Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, were criticising Jesus for gathering with sinners and people who didn't fit in around tables for meals. Jesus responds with a story that defends the company He chooses to keep. The story is full of surprises.

The first surprise is the demand of the younger son for his inheritance before his father was dead. Younger sons received around a third of the estate. It is a surprise that the older brother said nothing at the time. It is a surprise that the father goes along with the request. It's a surprise that the younger son, the Prodigal, decides to turn the property into cash, and then goes on to blow

the whole proceeds. Risky investments, riotous living, poverty in exile, removed from acceptable Jewish society because he's looking after pigs.

It's a surprise that the prodigal comes home after he'd come to his senses. It's a surprise the Father runs out to greet him, and demonstrates multiple signs of reconciliation: re-clothing; a fine ring, sandals, welcome back into family and community. It's a surprise that there is a celebration of radical table fellowship, a huge party with a roasted, fatted calf for everyone to share.

It's a surprise for the older brother, seeing the prodigal welcomed back by the Father without any recrimination or judgement. Even stretching things, whilst most religions provide some means by which a sinner can return and make restitution, they don't always get thrown a party. What kind of religion can this be? Who would attend such a party, where the guilty one was not punished in any form, and welcomed back as if nothing had happened?

When Jesus talks about His inclusive table fellowship and defends it against the accusations of the scribes and Pharisees, we find another surprise. In the portraits of the prodigal son and the compassionate father, the tax collectors, the sinners, the outcasts of Jesus' time hear confirmation that they are already reconciled to God in Jesus. They are welcome. The scribes and Pharisees are invited to contemplate an image of themselves in the figure of the eldest son, who has completely misread his filial duties as one of slavery to his father.¹

When we read this story from Jesus – what are we meant to do with it? How might it apply to the way we live? Here are some thoughts.

Which of the characters in the parable do you relate to when you hear it? Have there been times, are there times now, when you understand the life of the prodigal? I'm not privy to any knowledge about riotous living by members of the congregation, well, maybe some of the choral scholars...But not really. But some of you here will have had aspects of that outrageous past. Times

when you've gone off the rails. Times when you've abandoned your family at a young age. Times when your behaviour was appalling to a greater or lesser extent. Times when people who still loved you despaired of you. And if you've never been that prodigal, maybe you know someone who has – in the family, amongst your friends and acquaintances; in the workplace. Through the abuse of drink, or drugs, or casual sex; adopting attitudes and lifestyles that were hard to live with. Being a prodigal has a slightly distanced ring to it, but they're very much in our society today. On an official visit to London a few years ago I visited some of the homeless charities that have been set up to care for young Scottish people, leaving home, fleeing home sometimes, for a range of reasons. Finding the streets of London were not paved with gold. And no way home for them, if home existed at all. I spoke to some who had come to their senses and sought help. I spoke to others going from one drink or drug fix to the next, fuelling their addiction through sexual favours, or shoplifting. Prodigals exist, many in different parts of our justice system. Do we punish them; ostracise them; judge them; abandon them. What does the parable Jesus taught suggest to us? If you don't identify with the prodigal, maybe you identify with the older brother. A bit like Martha in the Martha and Mary story, the older brother feels put upon, and taken for granted. He's worked hard; never put a foot wrong; done everything he was asked to do, and probably a bit more; was dependable and reliable and clearly loved by his father. But there was an attitude that went with it. All the good he must have done, and there would have been a lot of good, seems somehow soured by his attitude to his brother, and his father. There's a kind of, 'it's not fair' feeling emanating from him. "I've done all this, and done nothing wrong, and yet this disgrace of a brother, welcomed back, honoured, and I get nothing." I think most of us at some time identify with that. Not that we don't do good, and do it well, but we expect it to be noticed, or at least, not assumed, not taken for granted. A little bit of recognition wouldn't go amiss, we think, not

that we do it for money, or recognition. Or is that, somewhere, deep down, an issue for us? From the most trivial of things that mark many sibling rivalries, like these two brothers, or Martha and Mary, to the posturing of nations who look to be doing good but are in fact doing it for their own benefit, and expecting payback. Britain was a bit like that in the days of Empire, as were all countries that had empires. And the United States and its current regime is behaving exactly like that at the moment in its foreign and economic policies. Even when they have a point, because nobody should be taken for granted or presumed upon, being the bigger person, and altruism, and general philanthropy is never self-regarding but world regarding and needs-of-others regarding, I would suggest. There are too many petulant older brothers in terms of this parable in the world today.

If you don't identify with either of the sons, maybe you identify with the Father. In Jesus' parable the Father is meant to suggest God. The person in the story with the bigger picture, and the greater heart. The person who can be strong enough to let people do what they want when they demand it, even if they know it may cause them harm, and is big enough to welcome them home when it all goes horribly wrong. Not saying, 'I told you so', but saying, "Come home, I still love you. I'll always love you." Maybe we don't get quite to the godlike level, but there will be times when you have forgiven someone much, because you have loved them more. Maybe you've helped someone learn from the mistakes they've made, not judging them but giving them that second chance that they needed. And maybe more than a second chance. An unfaithful partner; a deeply mistaken friend; a wrong-choice-making child. Oh, none of that is easy. It's why we often leave this identification in the parable to God; God can do it, whilst we struggle. But have there been times when you've given someone a second chance, even when they didn't deserve it, forgiving them much because you love them more.

These are some of the reasons this parable even in our C21st is dangerous. It reaches out, touches our lives, and asks us, which one are you in this story?

I think the Parable of the Prodigal Son, or the Forgiving Father, is a prelude to the resurrection. 'My son was dead, and is now alive.' It is an Easter story of its own kind, an Easter story that reaffirms that God's kingdom is about death-defying love. "In God's kingdom, the law is grace, the currency is mercy, and the economy is forgiveness everlasting."ⁱⁱ

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ J William Harkins, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 2, pps 88-90*

ⁱⁱ Christopher H Edmonton, *ibid*, p91