

Well Come Home Son

Luke 15:11-32

Readings: Joshua 5:2-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:11-32

Mark Twain once said “Familiarity breeds contempt ... and children”. This may seem like a rather strange introduction to perhaps the most beloved of Jesus’ parables, known traditionally as the parable of the prodigal son. But the more I thought about it the more appropriate it seemed.

Firstly the story is about children, frustrating annoying children, “there was a man who had two sons...” Secondly the story, as we shall see, has plenty of contempt in it, and seeks to deal with the issue. Thirdly most of us know this story so well, heard so many sermons on it that we assume that there is no more to learn and so we treat it with contempt. Consider what were you thinking as you heard the parable read, looking forward to learning more or thinking you had heard it all before.

Perhaps most seriously though this parable raises issues to the Christian faith, issues of sin and grace, that we can become so familiar with that we risk treating them with contempt which will have a devastating effect on our faith and our Christian community.

The challenge before us then today is to look at the teaching of this parable with fresh eyes and to be refreshed in our understanding of the ways of God.

SETTING THE SCENE

As we start looking at this parable we need to remember the context in which Jesus was speaking. As he is on his way to Jerusalem the Pharisees, the religious folk, are put out that Jesus is partying with the wrong people, the tax collectors and “sinners”. He has told two stories, the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin to show that as sinners are being welcomed back into God’s kingdom there is a party going on in heaven and so it is quite right to celebrate down here. To welcome in those who were outside is a deeply symbolic, even sacramental, joyous act and the Pharisees should be joining in rather than contemptuously standing outside.

In these first two stories the focus was completely on the Shepherd and the Woman, those who went looking for their lost property. The sheep and the coin play no active part but, as this third story starts, we become aware that a more complicated story is about to be told. “A man had two sons”

WELL COME HOME SON: THE SERIOUSNESS OF SIN (11-16)

As the story starts the focus quickly moves to the younger son. Familiarity for him had definitely bred contempt. The son wants what would normally only be his on the demise of his father, he is basically saying to his father “I wish you were dead!” It is hard to top that in the contempt stakes.

We also need to see this in the context of that culture rather than that of our own. While the father surprisingly granted the request the son would have understood that in so doing he would now be considered as dead by his family, such was the shame and disgrace that his action had caused. We have to take the language of “dead” and “lost” later in the story seriously. This son may have got the loot but he was lost to his family. This still happens in some Jewish families and others from such a culture if someone marries a non Jew or becomes a Christian they are treated as if they were dead and they are mourned as such. This son has burned his bridges and he knows it.

But he doesn't care, he sells up the property that he has been given. According to Jewish customs the eldest son used to get twice the inheritance of any other younger sons, so he sells off a third of the family property and heads out into the world.

Away from the control of his father he squanders the wealth of his father on wild living. It doesn't take a great deal of imagination, in fact it may even be unhelpful for us to use our imaginations as we think about wild living. Enough to say that he wasn't being a good Jewish boy.

But from the high life he comes down to earth with a great thud with bankruptcy and famine. It is hard to imagine a more contemptible situation for Jew than is described here, knowing he has wasted so much, he is in a foreign land, working for Gentiles, feeding pigs. Oh the horror, Jews really hated the idea of pigs. There was a sense of revulsion that we might have if we were looking after cockroaches or cane toads. But it was stronger than that for any contact with pigs made him ritually unclean, he would again be shunned by any Jews and excluded from the religious life of the nation. "Downright unAustralian" is sometimes used as the ultimate political put down, Jesus is saying this is "Downright unJewish."

Remember that in part Jesus was being accused by the Pharisees of being soft on sin. In eating and drinking with the unwashed, the ritual unclean and morally questionable, he was acting as if sin didn't matter, well here is Jesus' answer. Sin is something truly horrible, it is wishing that God was dead, squandering the good things that he has given us and finding yourself in the mire of your own making, totally cut off from God's people and the means of forgiveness. Jesus in narrative form is painting as black a picture of sin as anywhere else in the Bible.

We tend to think of sin as blemish that can be covered up, perhaps a character flaw to be worked on, but this story sees it much more. Sin is pathetic, self induced, degrading foolishness leaving us alienated from God and his people. That is how Jesus viewed sin, that is how he views our sin. We have all acted as if God were dead and we have gone our own way and it is a horror to God.

This is the first thing that this passage teaches us, sin is dreadful, it is contemptible and leads to awful consequences. Have we treated sin with contempt? It is only as we grasp the horror of sin, of what this son has done and has become that we will grasp the wonder of this story which says to all the prodigal sons no matter what we have done "Well, come home son."

WELCOME HOME SON: THE GRACE OF THE FATHER

Now at this point in the story we are usually told that the son repents of his behaviour and decides to go home. But we need to look closely at the text and consider whether this is really what happens (see v17-18).

He realises he can get food back at the old man's place. It will be better to eat humble pie than pig swill, but there is no indication that he is really sorry for his behaviour and the shame it has brought to his father. This does not sound like repentance to me, he is just being as self centred as always, the repentance and apology are just the means to an end, it is what he has to say to get fed.

Notice also that he is not coming to take back his place in the family, he understands that this is not an option, but he is coming back to earn his food as a hired man. He may now be heading in the right direction but hardly for completely the right reasons, or with a right understanding of his father to whom the focus of the story now turns.

Now if the action of the father in giving his wayward son his inheritance early was unusual, what happens next is even stranger. For the father, who it seems has been keeping an eye out for his lost offspring, rushes out to him and embraces him before he can say anything.

If this parable is told in a Middle Eastern context people usually laugh at this point because this behaviour is so ridiculous. His action is shameful, elderly men

simply don't run. They particularly do not run out to a son who has caused such shame and hardship to the family. Such sons should be shunned not ushered inside.

Now perhaps the repentance of the wastrel son is real (v21). Having been so warmly welcomed back as son he cannot speak of being a hired hand, it is simply inappropriate. All he can do is acknowledge his guilt and submit to his father's love.

And they throw a great party, the reinstatement of the son and the generosity of the father is emphasised by the robe, the ring, the Reeboks (sandals), and the roast (fatted calf was perhaps only eaten once a year). They have to celebrate not because the son has come home but because he has been welcomed home by the father at the father's expense. The prodigal is no longer to be considered dead or lost but alive and found.

This is a wonderful picture of how repentance works in real life. Most don't turn to God because of his majesty, his purity, because he is their creator God but because of their own need, perhaps also thinking that they can earn God's favour, but as they turn to God they find him rushing out to them to embrace them in his love, and are overpowered by grace.

Like the son we have no right to make any claim on God because of our rebellion against him and yet amazingly he welcomes us home, he says "Welcome home son" to us, even us. And he bears all the cost, the shame. Well may we sing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound."

WELL COME HOME SON 2: SONS OF THE FATHER

Now we come to the second son, and as we read his story it is very hard not to feel for his situation. Most think that he gets a raw deal. I wonder if that is the reason that often the second part of the story doesn't get told, it disquiets us, we are on the elder brother's side. If this is true then we need to take heed because this is the punchline of the whole story

Like the younger brother, he is in a field when he decides to come home, the field is just much closer to home. Approaching he hears the festivities and a servant tells him what is going on. Again notice the servant's speech focuses on what the father has done, "he has him home safe and sound" It is the father's work they are celebrating (27).

Enraged at this perceived injustice the elder brother refuses to join in. You can imagine the difficult task of the poor servant who has to go and tell the father in the midst of such a celebration of the current attitude of his other son. So the father now has to come out to get his elder son: this is really the parable of the two lost sons.

The elder son really lets his father have it; there is no respect in his tone or language. He treats his father as well as his brother with contempt: "this son of yours". We also see how he views his relationship with the father as he speaks of slaving and not disobeyed orders (even as he is in reality doing so).

But even to this now rebellious elder brother the father shows amazing grace. He does not condemn him but reminds him that he is his son and that he now has a brother again and it is only proper to celebrate. Notice the beautiful play between v30 and 32: from "this son of yours" to "this brother of yours".

That is how the story ends with the gracious father longing for the complete restoration of his family, and it is the elder brother who is left outside listening to his father's pleas "Well, come home son."

APPLICATION

Where then do we find ourselves in this parable?

We are often, of course, encouraged to see ourselves as the prodigal who has wandered far. Then we are encouraged to hear the call of "Well, come home" in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. When we come back to God Jesus assures

us our heavenly Father will say "Welcome home son, welcome home daughter." We are assured that there is a celebration in heaven as we move from dead to alive, lost to found. This is of course a good thing to be reminded of and if that is you today, then "well, come home", and let the party begin.

But perhaps we are more likely to find ourselves revealed as the non prodigal but still outside elder brother. This is the focus of the story. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees "you think you know so much about God but you are showing by the way you are responding to these "sinners" coming in that you haven't understood God at all."

As we have noted on the way through both sons view their relationship with their father as one of slave to master or employee to employer: "I will be a hired servant"; "I have slaved for you." Yet the father refuses to be known as anything other than father. He is not a master, his favour is not to be earned, it is simply given even when it is costly. For really this is not the story of the prodigal son, or the two lost sons, it is the story of the Father of Grace.

Failing to understand this is spiritually disastrous as Jesus shows by leaving the elder son remaining outside. In not grasping grace we ultimately alienate ourselves from God because he does not act as we think he should. We do tend to agree with the older brother, it is not fair, God should reward us.

Let me ask you a diagnostic question, do you think God owes you? In pastoral ministry it is something I see far too often, people cranky with God because others have a better marriage, health or children, or another happy clappy parish is doing better. If we think this way we will be disappointed because God does not operate this way, God does not owe us anything.

But if we understand the grace of God right then we will be marked by joy and gratitude as we thankfully receive all that God has given us - a welcome to the family, a welcome home, not as a reward, which we could never earn, but simply as a gift at his expense.

Furthermore if we get this right such an attitude will spill over into a joyous and gracious outlook towards others.

To perhaps ask a more dangerous diagnostic question how would you respond to many more people coming to the Cathedral who may not behave quite as you think they should? Would you rejoice that God was calling many into the family, or be cranky that things were changing. It is so easy to have an attitude of "if you want to be one of his you have to act like one of us." But such an attitude ultimately holds both God and those he has called into his family in contempt, and leave us standing on the outside.

The way back is to listen to our God who comes out to us and says "Son, daughter, remember the grace I have given you, the eternal promises of security and, well, come home."

In remembering God's grace to us, that we were dead and now have been made alive, that we were lost but now are found we will remember what we are celebrating both for ourselves and our brothers and sisters who have experienced the Father's welcome home.

Don't be stay outside.