

**Luke 15.1-3,11b-end**

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Cor 5:16-end

No doubt we're all very familiar with the parable of the 'prodigal son' or the 'lost son' or the 'runaway son', whatever we prefer to call it. It's perhaps the kind of Bible story we were taught in Sunday School or on a Christian basics course or at a confirmation class. But I have to say, the more I've reflected on this parable over the years, the more I'm convinced that it powerfully encapsulates the essence of what the gospel - the Good News of Jesus Christ - is fundamentally all about.

First of all, though, in order to get the most out of the parable, we need to look at the context in which it's set. Jesus is teaching in a public space and he attracts an audience of what are described as "tax collectors and sinners". These tax collectors are *not* respectable bowler-hatted employees of HM Revenue and Customs; rather, they were local Jewish guys who collected and

handed over taxes imposed by the occupying Romans, whilst adding on a tidy commission for themselves in the bargain. So they were regarded by their fellow Jews as both collaborators and thieves. The other unspecified "sinners" we could perhaps assume to be a mix of petty criminals and prostitutes from the local community. They naturally warmed to the teachings of this itinerant preacher, as what he said seemed to indicate that there was indeed hope for *them* – that God was really interested in *them* – yes, even those despised by society at large.

But this gathering of those considered by society as 'undesirables' itself attracted a *second* group who give their attention to Jesus. These are the Pharisees and scribes, the ultra-religious members of Judean society. The Pharisees were lay men who tried to observe every tiny detail of the Jewish law - or to be more precise, the oral traditions *added* to the actual Law of the Old Testament. And only someone wealthy could

actually do that. The scribes, meanwhile, were the professionals who ran the synagogue services and schools – they were the rabbis, the nearest equivalent to our present-day Anglican parish clergy.

Now our Gospel reading opens with this second group complaining that Jesus (who in their view ought to be more like *them*) is associating with outcasts and criminals. In response, Jesus tells three parables, one straight after the other (all of which will be familiar to us): the lost sheep, the lost coin, and then the lost son. Because the point of all three stories is that losing things we value makes us sad, but finding them again makes us happier than we were in the first place. And Jesus is using these parables to show his religious critics just why these disreputable tax collectors and ‘sinners’ are so important to God.

The way Jesus sees it, the scribes and Pharisees, by concerning themselves only with respectable

members of society, are like a shepherd who concentrates on the 99 well-behaved sheep safely in the fold, and ignores the one that has strayed; or like a woman who sits gloating over her nine lovely silver coins instead of noticing that one is missing and searching for it. But, he says, that is *not* what God wants. God gets more joy over *one* repentant sinner—*one* ‘lost’ soul who is found and rescued—than over all the righteous folk who were safely in the fold all the time.

The thing is, though, one can perhaps imagine the scribes and Pharisees reacting to this teaching by saying something like, ‘well, that’s all very well when it comes to sheep and coins – after all, it was probably simply by accident that the shepherd and the housewife had lost them in the first place. But in the case of these dodgy characters you’re mixing with - the ‘tax collectors and sinners’ - *they* didn’t get lost by accident. They’ve *deliberately* chosen to behave the way they do.’

And so, it would then make perfect sense for Jesus to tell his third and most detailed parable on the theme of 'lost and found' in order to tackle head on the question of motivation. He goes out of his way here to emphasise that everything that happens to the young man in the story is his *own* fault. *He's* the one who proactively asks for his slice of the family fortune now, instead of waiting till his father has died; in fact, in doing so, he's effectively treating his father as if he were already dead - it's profoundly offensive to his dad. *He's* the one who chooses to go away far from home, beyond the reach of family and friends to advise and guide him. *He* makes the conscious decision to 'blow his inheritance', we might say, and squander the lot on a depraved life of wine, women and song. So, when he hits rock bottom, there can be no question about it – he's got what he deserved; no-one else is to blame.

Yet still, says Jesus, when the young man comes home 'with his tail between his legs', he is still the beloved son who has been lost and now is found. No less than the blameless sheep and coin; the blameworthy lost human being—when found again—gives rise to unconstrained joy.

And this is why I believe that this well-known parable so wonderfully captures what the gospel is all about. Because here the truth is revealed that, like the earthly father in the parable, God our *heavenly* Father is waiting, indeed longing, for his wayward children to come back to him. The younger son had got himself into a right mess, but in spite of all this, when he returns to his father, confessing his wrongs and desiring to start again, his father welcomes him with unconditional love. It's almost like the father's been waiting all along in eager expectancy of his son's return.

And let's not forget that it's the storyteller himself who makes our reconciliation with God

possible. It's only through the forgiveness of our sins brought about through Christ's saving death on the Cross, that we *can* come back to our heavenly Father; "...*in Christ* God was reconciling the world to himself...", as Paul declares. And as one of our Post-Communion prayers, echoing this parable, puts it, '...when we were still far off, you met us *in your Son* and brought us home...'

Now any fair-minded person might naturally feel some sympathy for the hard-working elder son, who looks on with disgust as his wayward brother is welcomed home with such lavish celebrations. Why should his brother be treated like that, while his *own* faithful obedience to his father goes unrewarded? Well, going back to the context of the parable, we could see the elder brother as representing the position of the scribes and Pharisees. They had been trying to live faithful lives, meticulously observing the Jewish Law, and so they would no doubt have felt rather disturbed by the idea that God could actually welcome back the tax collectors and

'sinners' with open arms. Perhaps the message for *them* is found in the reassuring words of the father to his older son: "You are always with me, and all that I have is yours." And so, because of that, it would do them no harm – indeed it would do them a lot of good - to rejoice with God over the sinner seeking a new start.

But I do think there's a bit more to this. The thing is, it's possible to be safely in God's fold and yet forget why it is we have the privilege of being there in the first place. We are there *not* on account of any good works of our own, but through God's grace in Christ alone. The religious bigwigs of Jesus' day might have been tempted to think that following the Jewish Law to the tee made them right with God; today, we might assume that coming to church regularly, being baptised, confirmed, even ordained, and observing all the outward formalities of religion somehow make us right with God. But *no* – the truth is that it's only by *grace* that we are reconciled to God. When it comes down to it,

we're all in the same boat, whether younger son, older son, Pharisee, tax collector, scribe, Anglican parishioner, priest or bishop. We are all equally in need of God's mercy and are welcomed into his presence through his gracious love alone – it's all about God's amazing grace.

Now it maybe, as we hear this familiar parable, that we identify not so much with the righteous older son but with the younger one. Perhaps we too have been inclined to grab all the good things of life and squander them in selfish and foolish ways. It's so easy to turn away from our Creator and want to live life 'my way', on my *own* terms. Perhaps we've been trying to find happiness in fleeting pleasures which can never truly satisfy us. If that's the case, then God's word to us is less in the actual words and more in the *actions* of the father in the story. Because if *we* turn back to the Lord, if *we* seek a new start, we too can be assured that we are safe in the arms of our heavenly Father, for he is infinitely loving and merciful.

But just note this one thing - we are welcomed home on *his* terms, not our own. In his destitution, the younger son determines to go home and ask to be taken in as a *servant*. He had found the responsibility of being a son too much. He would seek a lowlier place, a less demanding role back in his father's household. *But* he's *not* given the chance. Yes, he's welcomed back; yes, there's much rejoicing. But the robe and the ring and the sandals that his father put on him are all symbols of authority and of sonship. And so it is with *us*. *We* cannot expect to slip quietly into some back room of God's Kingdom for a quiet, undemanding life. After all, when we are reconciled to God we become, as Paul puts it, "a new creation" – our old way of life is gone and we now live our lives as transformed people – transformed by God's grace through the power of the Holy Spirit. As *his* adopted sons and daughters, we are called to live and work to *his* praise and glory.

Now today is, of course, Mothering Sunday. Though it's become something of a celebration of motherhood, that's not what it was originally about. Originally it was a Sunday when domestic servants were given a day off by their employers to be able to go back home to spend some time with their families, which also tended to include an opportunity to worship at their home parish church or cathedral. It was all about 'coming home', if only, in their case, for that one day. In our Old Testament reading from the book of Joshua, it mentions that at Gilgal, the Israelites exchanged the food of the wilderness for the food of *home*. Whereas before, during their wanderings in the desert, they had fed on the manna which God had graciously provided, now they could eat from the crops of the land of Canaan itself, the Promised Land – from that moment on, *they* had well and truly come *home*.

Perhaps today, the Lord is calling *us* to come back to *him* – to 'come home'. When we do so,

we can be assured of our heavenly Father's response to us: 'Welcome home my beloved son, my beloved daughter.'

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks that, through the sacrifice of your Son made once for all upon the Cross, we can know our sins forgiven and be reconciled to you. We thank you that, whenever we stray from your way, you are there, waiting for us to come home. May we never take your amazing love and grace for granted, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.