

Gospel Sunday Prodigal Son

Dear friends...I'd like you to hold this truth...

God's love is greater than any of our failures

And greater than any of our objections

It has been said that the parable of the Prodigal son is the gospel in a nutshell

It tells of God's great love and forgiveness...It tells us that the God Jesus understood...is always ready to welcome home those who will change their hearts and minds.

It's important that we understand how families at the time of Jesus worked

It was a very patriarchal time...Father was the boss!

For a son to have asked for his share of his inheritance would have brought great shame not only on the son who asked...but also upon the whole family and especially his Father

It was the equivalent of saying to his father...I want what is mine...and I wish you were dead

If we cast our minds back to the very beginning...it is not unlike Adam and Eve rejecting God's love for their own glory

So that as the liar told them...They too could be like God

Incredibly the father in Jesus' parable bears the rejection and the shame...

Fathers just did not behave in this way at that time

Any right-minded person would have said...He should have punished his son...

Or at least have thrown him out with nothing

And so there is a mystery here in this story, before we even begin...

...This father is not like one we know

There is shame an abandonment of obligations and love...but also acceptance of his sons choice and freedom

The son walks away from home...Out of the garden of his Father

And of course...as we know...the son very quickly loses all of his money in a foreign land and finds himself in trouble...

Very quickly he slips into self-destructive behaviour and addictions

Very quickly the lies...begin to bear fruit

He sinks lower and lower and he is degraded over and over again

As we know...For a Jew to have had anything to do with pigs was absolutely forbidden

Deuteronomy 14:8

The Pig is also unclean, although it has a split hoof, it does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses

Or perhaps even more frightening...

Isaiah 66:17

Those who eat the flesh of pigs and rats and other abominable things...they will meet their end together

To be desperate enough to work with pigs and hungry enough to eat the food of is beyond imagination.

We can assume that he has reached rock bottom in the ears of the Jewish listeners

We can also assume that he is as far from home as you can possibly get...

because he must be working amongst foreign gentiles...Pig farmers

A very, very long way from His Father's house...The garden

There is then the most remarkable line...*When he came to his senses*

It is almost as if he wakes up

It feels like that moment when we have a change of mind towards God...The father

We wake up and realise...We come to our deepest senses...We have a change of heart and we repent...We have a change of mind

Our focus then turns back to the father

We realise how lost we are...How blind and deaf we have become...

How addicted and self destructive our lives have become

We look around and we know we are a long way from home...From love and the truth of our lives

This is the decision of the Gospel...The decision of our hearts

And we turn...and in our turning we place our feet on the path home

Then something truly beyond belief happens

What we hear now is really beyond the understanding of Jesus listeners...

In their culture senior figures were far too dignified to run anywhere

But this Father has been watching and waiting... and as soon as he sees his pitiful son walking along the road towards home he runs to meet him

An undignified and shameless act...of joy and love and welcome...Undeserved and freely given

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And of course it is that greeting that is at the heart of this parable

Jesus is explaining why there is a party...why they should all celebrate when people turn from the path of self and self-destructiveness...and come home

The son's degradation was almost complete

There is absolutely nothing that commends him to his father...

There is nothing that he has done to deserve his Father's love

But the father says...This son was dead and is alive, he was lost and now is found

This is the Gospel

...free...audacious...unbelievable...extraordinary...abundant...beautiful...pure untarnished forgiveness and love

Grace poured out without measure for all who ask

Inside this parable is yet another layer that you may not have seen

The great story of Israel's past is the story of the exodus

When Israel was brought out of Egypt and brought home to the Promised land

Many years later Israel was sent into exile in Babylon

Although many of the exiles returned...most of the people of Jesus time still felt as if they were living in a form of exile. In evil and dark days with pagans...The Romans [Pig farmers]... ruling over them...

They were waiting for God to bring a new Exodus

A liberation that would bring them out of their spiritual and cultural exile...and restore them to God's promises...And of course it was the Messiah who would bring that liberation

Now hear the story of the Prodigal son again

A story of a rebellious son...lost in a foreign land...who was welcomed back into the arms of a gracious God

This was bound to be heard as a reference to the hope of Israel

This my son [Israel] who was dead, and is alive

Ever since Ezekiel 37 the idea of resurrection...of coming back to life... had been used as a picture for the true return from exile

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you and you will come to life.

I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel

Resurrection and return...Life from death...The lost and the found...Homecoming

And all of this is happening right under the noses of Jesus' listeners...In Jesus himself

Yes he says...in my story all that you have hoped for is happening right now

When all of those sinners and those broken and rejected people repent and turn back to God...

When they responded positively to Jesus and his message...the Good news of God's grace and forgiveness...The coming of God's Kingdom

Then and there the true return from exile is happening

And that is true whether you like it or not

And that is true whether it looks like what you want it to look like...or not

His answer to the Pharisees and the other critics is really very simple

If God is fulfilling his promises before your eyes...how can you object if I throw a party to celebrate? What else should we do?

From the moment the Father gives his son what he wanted...to the wonderful homecoming...We have a clear picture in Jesus' teaching of what God is like

And indeed of what Jesus took as his model for his life...His ministry to welcome the lost

We need now to turn to the older brother

This of course is Jesus response to those who are judging him

They were focussed on the wickedness of the tax collectors and sinners...The Lepers and the prostitutes

And here was Jesus claiming to be the servant of God...

...mixing with those they thought were the furthest from God...The foul and filthy

All these people were being healed and changed having their lives transformed...

...but the Pharisees could only see darkness and the danger of impurity, contamination and sin

Listen to the interchange between the Father and his eldest son who represents the people who judge...

Its very interesting just to hear again the detail of what's going on...

Your brother...says the servant...has come home

But the eldest son won't think of him in this way...

This son of yours he says angrily to his father

This your brother...says the father...reminding him gently of the truth of their relationship

I've been slaving for you...he says to his father

Actually everything the father has belongs to him...since the younger son had spent his share

The most telling phrase then comes...*I've never disobeyed a single command of yours...* That was the Pharisees boast

Philippians 3:6...Listen to Paul...a former proud Pharisee...

A Pharisee...as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for legalistic, righteousness...I was faultless

But of course moral superiority is nothing before God's grace and love

Resurrection is happening, new life is bursting forth...

*I will put my spirit in you and you will live...*as Ezekiel prophesied

If you can't see that Jesus says...then you can't see what God is doing

It is to deny the goodness and grace of God

It seems that whenever God does great things there is always someone muttering in the background that things aren't that good

That God's somehow has no right to be so generous

That people who have done nothing wrong are being hard done by...

...are losing out because the so called unworthy are being welcome home

The liar is still hissing in the ears of God's children

The story reveals a deep self-centredness...The Elder son shows in his anger that he has no ...more respect for his father than his younger son had had

He lectures his father and refuses to come in

It's very important to notice something at this point...

Jesus wants them to know that although God is reaching out to the outcasts...it does not mean that there is no room for them

It is never one or another...It always your choice...There is a place at the table for you

If they insist on staying outside...it will be their choice and not because God doesn't love them

You will have noticed too that the father also comes out of the house...to bring his elder son in...Just as he had for the younger son

His older son is lost...once again the Father goes out and offers a welcome against all cultural norms

The story is left unfinished...

We want to know what happens next...But we are left on the edge of our seats for a reason.

This parable is the Gospel...And the gospel calls us to a response...a choice

We need to think this through...where do you fit within this story?

And where do we fit as church?

Which role in the story does our church play?

How can we celebrate the party of God's welcome?

We know in part that we are the younger son...sinners and the recipients of God's forgiveness...Lost and found

We know in part that we are the elder son struggling with our judgements and the lies in our hearts about God and others

Struggling with the enormity and scandal of grace and forgiveness

But we are also called to become like the father...

And so...Can we extend an invitation not only to all of those lost younger brothers and sisters... who have come back from the dead...

But also the older brothers and sisters who think there is nothing wrong with them...And can we love them both in equal measure knowing like Jesus that they are free to say no?

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God bless you all with wisdom and choice...Amen