

## Lent 4C, 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2010

Luke 15:11-32

### Prodigal

It's one of the best known stories from the Scriptures. The "Prodigal Son". The name just rolls off our tongues. "Kill the fatted calf" we say for our family feasting. "Where's Mum?" the women across the centuries have asked. A repentant sinner returns, maybe.

"Prodigal" – reckless, extravagant, wasteful, so the dictionary tells us. But I can't call this story the "Prodigal Son" anymore. The son's excessiveness is nothing compared to the father's.

The great power in this story lies in its ability to draw us in. We can see ourselves in this scenario. And over time, we can see ourselves in different characters as our life stories evolve. The child who wishes their parent dead; the young adult leaving home rather rudely and living it up. Going broke, returning home. Jealous sibling spitting the dummy. As parent, watching and waiting hopefully for a straying child to return – days, months, years.

And the ending to the first part of the story- sheer joy. Seems a shame to spoil the celebration with the bit about the brother's reaction. But that's where the punch of the parable lies for the scribes and Pharisees who are listening in – they're the ones being labelled as the older sons of religion.

That great drawing power of the story is also its weakness. We can so identify with it, that it's all too easy to hear it without the cultural complexities of Jesus' time and place. Without that understanding, we miss the full impact of the parable; we miss hearing what it is that Jesus is opening our eyes to. Remember the "rule" about parables –if it's all too easy to understand, we've missed the thrust. Jesus used parables to shock his hearers and challenge the listener's preconceptions about God. And so the parables are meant to challenge us – we hang onto as many misconceptions and delusions about God as the ancients did. So, let's hear it as Jesus intended.

"Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me". It's not uncommon these days for our adult children to ask for substantial help –to buy a home, to pursue higher studies; it's not uncommon that parents help them out – a gift, a loan. But what about in a society where the rules about inheritance are deeply embedded in tradition and law? Where property –land – had great religious meaning – where it was God's gift to families of their ancestral holdings.

It was outrageous for a father to be asked for an inheritance before his death. It was as good as saying "I wish you were dead". In this society, built on shame and honour, where people's acceptance revolved around being seen to keep the social rules, fathers had to be publically honoured. The son's request – and you can be assured that the whole community would know about it – was

about the worst dishonour imaginable. It was a diminishing of the family's name, the family's honour, not to mention the family fortunes.

Do you know what the Deuteronomic law prescribed for stubborn and rebellious sons? The parents were supposed to hand him over to the town elders to be stoned to death. (Deut 21:21) That's how seriously this request would have been heard. So- shocks number 1 and 2 for Jesus' audience: the audacity and dishonourable behaviour of the son, and the father actually handing over the property. Shock number 3 follows quickly: the elder son did nothing to defend the honour of his father, as would be expected of him. And did you note in the text: the father "divided the property between them". Double dishonour for Dad – not just the younger son wishing him dead, but the older one joining in that dishonour. These days, we might feel sympathy for the parents. When our friends and neighbours suffer with their kids going off the rails, we gather around and give love and support. Absolutely not so back then – there would have been fingers of blame pointed at the father – he allowed all that to happen! And the shame brought on that family would have marginalised them from the community.

The younger son's wanton behaviour – going off to foreign lands, squandering the property in dissolute living and ending up broke and broken amongst pigs (another total disgrace for a Jew) – all that compounded the shame brought on his family.

And what of this younger son? He's put himself way beyond inclusion in his society. Defeated by the squalor he's ended up in, he returns home. Is his repentance real? Is he manipulating or truly sorry? Stomach-driven or heart-felt? The jury of Biblical scholar's out on that. And there was the real possibility that on returning home his family would treat him as dead. He could face a custom known as "the cutting off", in which a clay pot would be broken at his feet to symbolise the community's rejection of him. Worst case scenario would be that they would try to stone him. We can imagine his fears in this return.

And now the most shocking action. His father squanders what little dignity he has left. He sees his son at a distance and picks up his robes and runs to him and kisses him: a huge violation of social norms for a man to behave in that way, AND towards someone who everyone thinks ought to be punished severely. The father calls for sandals on his son's feet, a ring on his finger and a new robe. Sandals – the mark of a free man; for this son, in the sight of the townspeople, the public mark of restoration and forgiveness. And a great feast of celebration and welcome to follow.

And in the background, we witness the jealous outrage of the elder brother: "it's not fair" he's screaming rather self-righteously at his Father laying on such a celebration. "what about me?" Yet, as the Father says "All that is mine is yours. It always has been". In the end, neither son deserves the Father's generous love, but loved and embraced they both are, regardless.

Mind you – there’s a quirky twist here – the son will still face the consequences of his actions. There is no more inheritance for the father to give this younger son. The other brother is the holder of the property, and the younger brother would have to be dependent on him from here on in. Sin will make its own consequences.

We know Jesus is getting a message across to his listeners, then and now, about God the Father found in Christ. For the first century listener, this is God portrayed in a display of reconciling love, scandalous according to the custom of that time and place. Absolutely, hugely, contrary to what people hope, expect and set God up to be: and we can hear the same echoes down the centuries, across all cultures, and often in the church itself: surely God should punish such sinful and dissolute behaviour; surely he would set up all sorts of conditions around his son’s acceptance back home. But no - this here is a God lavish in welcome, “outrageously and extravagantly in love with humanity.”<sup>i</sup> A prodigal Father and prodigal God – reckless, extravagant and wasteful with love and forgiveness, grace, welcome and inclusion. A God who looks for our return and runs to embrace us, not because of our repentance but **because of who he is.**

“This kind of God is one who must celebrate when the lost are found; must celebrate every measure of resurrection, of life from death, without pausing to think whether the one given life deserves it.

And guess what? We’re meant to imitate him. We’re meant to consider giving welcome, forgiveness, and joy of our very selves, sacrificially and without regard to a person’s worthiness.”<sup>ii</sup>

Shocking, isn’t it, to have such a prodigal Father as our God? And even more shocking that we’re called to be likewise.

For your Lenten reflection this week: How does that sit with you?

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<sup>i</sup> Colleen O’Reilly, *Walking with Jesus through Lent. Lent 4 reflection*. Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, 2010

<sup>ii</sup> Much of these two paragraphs taken from Sarah Dylan Breuer’s lectionary blog. SarahLaughed.net