

Sunday 12th March 2023 – Be Restored

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Luke 15:11-32 The Parable of the Lost Son

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

This parable is arguably one of the most famous stories ever taught. It is the third parable in a set of three that Jesus addressed to challenge the dogmatic religious leaders of the time who were ‘muttering’ and complaining that “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them”.

Luke chapter 15 sits within a body of teaching known as ‘The Travel document’ because the writer Luke places it after Jesus had made his strategic decision to head to Jerusalem, preaching and teaching as he went through the towns and villages on his way. The storm clouds are gathering and tensions are rising as the Gospel story leads inexorably on towards the great confrontation of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. That is the great battle, not only with the religious establishment, but with the powers and principalities of evil that thrive on religious exclusivity and power.

Verse 2 tells us that the religious leaders were ‘muttering’ – (*diagongyzō* in Greek), they were complaining about Jesus’ apparent acceptance of people like tax collectors and prostitutes. Tax collectors were hated collaborators, viewed as national traitors in league with the Roman occupiers. Prostitutes were clearly sinners – viewed as temptresses with a corrupting influence on society and family life. The pharisees taught that God’s people needed to keep themselves pure, separating themselves from corruption and abandoning these people to their self-inflicted destruction.

But Jesus tells three stories to challenge this mode of thinking. The first is the parable of the lost sheep, then the parable of the lost coin and finally this story of the lost son. Note that the focus shifts from business to home to family relationships as the stories progress. One sheep out of a hundred, one coin out of 10, then finally 2 sons and their Father.

Kenneth Bailey suggests that this parable should be called ‘the compassionate Father and the two lost sons’, but that isn’t quite as catchy as the usual title of *the prodigal son*! It does however highlight the fact that we often concentrate on the younger son, when Jesus wants us to observe the behaviour of all three characters.

In each of the three parables Jesus depicts a person who demonstrates what God is like. A good shepherd, a careful woman and finally a compassionate Father. We looked last week at how Jesus teaching on prayer began with the radical privilege of addressing God as *Our Father*. Well this parable reinforces that notion that God is not only our Father, but his parental compassion is so radical that as William Temple puts it, ‘He even grants us the freedom to reject his love’.

The notion of any son or daughter demanding their inheritance while their parent is still alive was as ludicrous for 1st century Jews as it is for us today. It is clearly deeply insulting to parental honour and dignity. And yet the younger son is either blind to it or so selfish that he cannot see the pain he is inflicting. It does happen today. A couple of our friends adopted a child who had experienced trauma in their early years, and despite all their efforts to show love, kindness and good parenting, on many occasions their money was stolen, or the house trashed in the search for drug money. Their continuing patience and love leaves me in awe sometimes.

So the younger son squanders all the money in wild living, but then reaches crisis point during the equivalent of an economic crash. He ends up feeding pigs. This would be the lowest of the low as far as pharisees were concerned. Virtually hell on earth. Maybe they would be muttering that he deserved it. And in fact Kenneth Bailey points out that in 1st Century village society, someone who had abandoned the village and behaved dishonourably giving wealth away to Gentiles could expect to be 'cut off' from his people in a ceremony called a Kezazah. A pot would be smashed outside the village gate and the people would declare together that the offender would be disowned.

So the younger son has very few options. He is now hungry and desperate. The key phrase is verse 17 'when he came to his senses', literally 'when he came to himself'. He couldn't indulge in escapism any longer. He finally understood had hit rock bottom and needed help.

During my curacy in Weston-super-Mare, I worked for a while leading a charity which had projects helping people in recovery. Sometimes they fell off the wagon and it would be dreadful to have to stand by and wait for them to 'come back to their senses' and choose to seek the help for themselves. The basic rule is you cannot help someone who hasn't reached that point of inflection, the moment they realise they cannot handle life and need help.

The younger son knew he needed help but he thinks his salvation would be through getting a job working on his Father's estate. His motivation at this point isn't restoring relationship – it's all about getting money in his pocket, food to eat and security from earnings. His phraseology of his rehearsed speech has echoes of Pharaoh's insincere speeches to Moses in Exodus and it ends with a manipulative demand: 'make me like one of your hired servants'. In other words: '*Give me a job!*' His desperation drives him to set out on his journey to return to the village.

But now we are introduced to the Father, who saw the younger son 'While he was still a long way off'. The wording reminds me of Romans 5v8 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'

Instead of our usual way of thinking of God as 'up there', and we are all of us 'down here' trying to climb up to reach him, Jesus radically changes this imagery to convey that God is actually the one seeking us. God is the good shepherd, God is the woman searching for the lost coin, God is the one actively seeking reconciliation with his lost children. Apparently Arab and Muslim critics of Christianity point to this parable as evidence that one can be saved merely through repentance, but they fail to grasp the point. It is the Father's proactive humility and compassion that brings about the reconciliation. Jesus said 'The son of man came to seek and to save the lost'.

God is seeking you today! Even if you are far off but on a journey back towards him he will come running to meet you.

The image of the Father running out of the village to meet the son is a humiliation in middle eastern culture. The head of the household does not run, particularly towards someone who has dishonoured the whole village. The villagers would have been ready to smash their pot and disown him entirely. But the Father short-circuits their ceremonial justice, and runs past them to greet the son. I remember the joy of running to hug up my son Ethan who had initially decided not to come with me and Reuben on a walk up Snowdon, only to decide a bit later that he wanted to come after all. It took him several miles to catch us and O the relief when we were reunited!

The Father threw his arms around his son and kissed him, even before any repentance speech had taken place. The younger son's plans for earning his way back to acceptance are completely washed away in a flood of the Father's love and compassion.

Romans 2v4 tells us that it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance. And we see that demonstrated by the revised shortened speech of the son in v21. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

This is the moment of reconciliation, initiated not by the son, but by the Father's compassion. The servants were seeing and hearing all this because they were instructed to get the BBQ going and kill the fatted calf. And the party begins, with the son restored to his place as part of the family with a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet.

Now part two of the parable begins, with the older son's reaction. And you can almost imagine Jesus looking directly at the Pharisees he was addressing as he told them the next part of the story.

The older brother's refusal to go in to the Father's banquet would have been another insult to the Father's honour and dignity.

Yet again, the Father humbled himself by going out to meet him, even *pleading* with him. A second humiliation in front of his party guests.

This parable is all about *sonship* versus *servanthood*. The younger son didn't care that he had lost his sonship, the older son didn't realise he still had it. They both in their different ways assumed the roles of servants when actually the Father just wanted them to take up their roles as sons.

The older son condemns himself by his own angry words "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

The older son doesn't address the Father with respect but launches straight into his angry tirade. 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you.'

There is a danger in Church life that we only get involved out of a sense of duty, or even guilt. Are we serving the Lord out of love, or to earn favour? Is it more important for us to be righteous or to actually share cheerfully in bringing about the Lord's loving purposes for our community?

At the beginning of the parable it tells us that the Father divided his wealth between the two sons. So the older brother knows he has an inheritance to come in due course. But he still says 'you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends'. Hope of glory is sometimes not enough for those who want their reward in the here and now.

The older son failed to recognise the banquet is actually the a celebration of reconciliation and family unity. The fatted calf was not killed so the younger son could go off and celebrate alone with his friends, this was the Father's celebration. Jesus invites us to join in with the Father's celebration. The heavenly banquet is served and we are invited in. Will we join in? Or will our pride and misplaced anger keep us outside?

Of course the Parable ends with a question hanging in the air. The missing climax to the story. What did the older brother do? What would the pharisees do?

Sadly, history tells us the epilogue to the parable. The older brother refused to go in, but dragged the Father outside the village and crucified him.

Jesus said 'If you have seen me you have seen the Father'. He takes the place of the Father in the story, humbling himself to plead with everyone to be reconciled to God. We can either take steps towards him, or refuse to go in. The choice is ours.

I'd like to finish by telling you the story of Rick Hoyt. When he was born in 1962, complications at birth meant he was left quadriplegic. His parents Dick and Judy were told that there was no hope for his development, but despite being told he would 'only be a vegetable' they resolved to raise him as normally as possible. They got a group of engineers to develop an interactive computer system so he could communicate his thoughts using the slight head movements he could manage.

At the age of 15 Rick asked his Father if there was any way he could participate in a 5 mile charity run for a local sportsman who had been paralysed in an accident. So Dick agreed to push Rick along on his wheelchair. They finished nearly last but Rick was elated by the achievement, saying that for the first time in his life 'he just didn't feel disabled'. So spurred on by this revelation, 'Team Hoyt' as they became known started entering more and more races, until they were entering marathons and even Iron man competitions together. The rest as they say is history, but it is a powerful reminder of our Father's love and commitment towards us. He gave everything so that we might have life in all its fulness.

Video: <https://youtu.be/rF7Bv9RjI0E>