

The Prodigal Son

We usually call the reading from Luke the parable of the prodigal son. That is the wasteful son. But the parable is clearly about the Father – there was a certain man!.. and in this story it is the Father who is monumentally wasteful, disgracefully uneconomic with his love. But the Father in this story clearly draws our attention to the character of God the Father. The parable is an explosive narrative, clearly designed to blow apart the normal first century way of reading Jewish history, and replace it with something different.

But before reading this as a nice story about how loving God really is, it is crucial to get the context right, to try to hear this as its first readers may have heard it. Above all, the parable is a story of exile and restoration – exile and restoration – a story that already spilled out over the hearts and minds of first century Palestinian Jews.

The Babylonian empire had taken the people into captivity. A couple of generations later, Babylon is conquered by the more humane Persian empire, and the people returned home. But in Jesus' day, many, if not most Jews, regarded the exile as somehow continuing. Sure the people had physically returned to the promised Land, but the great prophecies of the restoration had not yet come true. Their hearts were still in exile. What was Israel supposed to do? Well, to repent of the sin that had led to their exile, and to return to YHWH wholeheartedly! Israel would return, humbled, redeemed, her sins forgiven, the covenant renewed, the temple rebuilt, the dead raised. Exile and restoration, the story that shaped the popular hopes and dreams of all people. And this story of the prodigal father, is a story about exile and restoration.

What the story of the prodigal says is this: this is the central drama that Israel believed herself to be acting out. And this hope is now being fulfilled – even if it doesn't look quite how everyone expected it to look! Israel went into exile because of her own stupidity and disobedience, and is now returning simply because of the unbelievably prodigal love of her God.

But this is a subversive story. The real return from exile is taking place in the ministry of Jesus. This is what the kingdom of God looks like when it comes. Those who grumble at what is happening are cast in the role of the Jews who did not go into exile, and who opposed the people when they returned from Exile. They are, in other words, viturally Samaritans!

The true Israel is coming to her senses, and returning to its father as Jeremiah had foretold. And those who oppose this great movement of divine love and grace are defining themselves as outside the true family! There are other resonances in the story as well – the exodus rumbles on in the background of slavery in foreign land and the expectation of release. Then the two brothers, and the injustice of one of the younger brother receiving an inheritance that seemed unfair. But undeniably, the main point of the story is that of exile and restoration. The long awaited hope of all Israel, is being fulfilled here and now in the ministry of Jesus.

And in that ministry, the self appointed stay at home guardians of the Father's house – the elder brothers of faithful Israel – are shown in a different light as Jesus welcomes the outcasts and sinners – in just the way that the prophets had foretold.

But in the midst of it all, the father is utterly prodigal. To begin with, for a younger son to ask his living father for his inheritance was unthinkable. It is the functional equivalent of saying

to his father, “I wish you were dead!” The Father should have beaten him and thrown him out – and what does he do? He consents!

Next, the son ends up making a living from which there was no return. You could not sink any lower than feeding the pigs of a Gentile boss. And to cap it all, most unimaginable of all, he decides to return home – threatening to disgrace the family in front of the whole village!

So what happens in the story to subvert beliefs about who God is? The father of any family was dignified – but this Father – who sees his son from a distance – implying that he had been longing for his return – *this father runs out to meet him*. No father would be so undignified, and certainly not towards a disgraceful and undeserving son!

And the point Jesus makes is simply this. That far from going through the religious procedures for accessing God – eating these celebratory meals with sinners and welcoming them into the Kingdom of God is the true fulfilment of all that the prophets had spoke of. Could Jesus’ undignified ministry truly reflect the character of a Holy God they might have asked him. And his reply is to tell this parable – a parable about a God who is wasteful with his love for his people.

The kind of love encountered by Hosea, whose wife’s unfaithfulness grieved and angered and wounded him deeply. But he could not stop loving her, nor let go of her. This is precisely the love of God that Hosea himself proclaimed because he had experienced the pain of enduring committed love himself. The same picture of God is painted by Jesus with this parable.

But this is not simply a nice story about how God loves even the worst of sinners. Not simply a picture of how God graciously forgives and welcomes those who return to him. Although it clearly implies that. It says much more deeply, that this undignified, messy, sweaty, idiotic, wasteful, prodigal father is precisely the character of a holy God. It is a deeply disturbing picture if you are a serious guardian of the religious institutions of Israel in the first century.

But it is less disturbing for us perhaps, because we do not live in the same cultural climate. We do not have the same beliefs or expectations as those who first heard the story, so much of its force is lost upon us. And we are left with a nice individualistic story of how God deals with fortunate individuals. God’s love is unconditional, undignified, but not unexpected. Even atheists facing death believed that if there was a God, God would forgive them because that was his job.

So what are we left with in our day and age, other than the message that it doesn’t matter who you are, how low you have sunk, what you have done ... God will forgive you, and bless you? Most of us already believe that! ... Or do we?

Well, it is pretty easy to believe in a God who is loving and forgiving and everything, when God is unseen and unfelt. Jesus is absent – that is the point of the Ascension – he has gone to be with the father. And if Jesus is absent, and he doesn’t physically appear to us, or communicate with us in straightforward ways, then isn’t it a bit lame to talk about the character of God! What evidence is there in our world today of the character of God? God is not here, the kingdom is not coming. Every couple of seconds a child dies of easily preventable causes. Every minute, twenty five people die because they have no access to clean water. And let’s not just think of the statistics – these are real people, many of them Christians who love God. And their lives end. And what evidence have they seen of the

Kingdom of God coming into their lives. Suffering and hardship and death are not theories, but realities in our world – which, as this century unfolds, will get worse and worse and worse. Where is the loving Father waiting to bless his children? I may be painting a gloomy picture, putting a negative spin on the facts to make a rhetorical point. But anyone who looks into the economic and ecological realities that we face will know that the near future holds unprecedented disaster for the human race. Sure, people of every generation have made claims of doom and gloom. – Sure, each generation has claimed that theirs is different. But in the twentieth century our planet became mortal in many ways. The fragility of life on earth, ecologically, economically, in light of nuclear powers have led many to believe that the world will end not with the sounding of a trumpet call from heaven, but at the flick of a switch in the Pentagon. And that may well be the case? And where is God in the face of the unstoppable tide of unprecedented human disaster? Where is the God who is promising to bless the little people who return to him?

But maybe the point of this parable is that God is not so absent as we might think. Maybe in the midst of this stinking pigswill where the younger brother existed, is where God makes himself at home. Maybe it is precisely in shaping and reshaping the lives of those who mediate his love, not only or even primarily in the corridors of power. But on the streets, in the broken homes, with those who are hungry and powerless and forgotten. And if we spend time with those very people that we might think forsaken, when we hear their own voice, often enough they will tell us a different story. The suffering people of our world are often used as rhetorical statistics by those with an ax to grind against belief in a loving God.

In light of all that is wrong in the world, it is hardly surprising that many Christians focus rather upon spiritual truths, or about God can give us the life we always wanted. Many models of church born out of business principles have led us in this direction. To focus on providing a great welcome, to focus upon lively worship, and relevant sermons, and good coffee, and fine car parking and crèche. A welcoming atmosphere.

But then you walk into Bloomsbury this afternoon. And what greets you? The intolerable, repulsive aroma of a homeless person who left several hours earlier, a disgusting smell that did not leave with its host. What kind of stinking, horrible welcome does that offer? I'll tell you what kind of welcome it offers. Precisely the kind of welcome offered by a sweaty, undignified wasteful Father, who also happens to be a Holy God. Holy, not because he is at arms length from all that is wrong with our world. But Holy because into this messy world of suffering and injustice, comes a grace that is not, and would not and cannot be generated by the very best that this world has to offer.

Into this world, comes the Kingdom of God. And that kingdom is not one that smells of roses, and air freshener. It is one that smells like the foyer did this afternoon. And who are the people who are likely to be offended and repelled by such an overpowering odour? Who are the ones who are likely to say that we must fumigate the place before we can offer an effective welcome? Who are they? They are the older brother, the guardians of God's blessing.

In fact, one of the beautiful and abiding images of our church comes from last year. Our most dignified and respectable church secretary, down on all fours cleaning up from a carpet the former contents of a visitor's bowels. If you want to know what God is like, how he deals with us, the welcome he offers us – if you want to see the image of God conjured up by this parable, transforming our view of holiness and dignity and welcome – there it is.