

Lk 15

During the season of Advent we focus upon the coming one, God's messiah – as we prepare to celebrate his presence with us at Christmas.

And an important dimension of Advent is the way that we engage with the days and years that stretch out ahead of us. Generally, when we think of days that have not yet come to us – we think in terms of future. And future has a very definite and clear sense of direction: we are here – and out there ahead of us, is the great undiscovered world of infinite possibility. So we are people, ready to march into the future and conquer it – the crusading forces of human enterprise, ready to seize the future and make good use of it.

But Advent gives us a different understanding of our place among the days that God has given to us. Implicit within advent is the idea that the future is not something we move towards or into, but something that comes towards us. The future is something that we receive as a gift – it is not our birthright, not our world of opportunity. A gift, that comes towards us – and for which we prepare ourselves.

I'm not saying that one way of understanding the world is better than another. Just that they are both necessary to have a full grasp of what it means to live full lives. And as I think about this dual direction in Advent – I couldn't help being drawn towards the parable of the prodigal son.

Here – we see something of what Advent means for God himself. This is a God longing for the return of his rebellious son. A God, longing and waiting – scanning the horizon every day for the coming of his Son. This was a son that wasn't coming back. This is a son who had wished his father dead by demanding his inheritance while his father was still alive. And the son had wasted it all.

But in this parable, we are invited to see God himself – keeping advent. God himself, making himself vulnerable with and to the people he created and whom he loves. God himself longing, waiting, hoping. And what happens when the image of his wayward son appears on the horizon? The father does all the things a good Jewish father would never have done – running out in the heat to go and embrace his Son. Throwing a party – as if his son's total failure was something to celebrate.

Of course, some of us will identify ourselves with this prodigal son. The one who's made such a mess of his life, who's dragged his family name through the dirt and who comes to God with his tale between his legs.

But there are plenty of us that will identify more fully with the older brother – who looks at how his father reacts and sees that this is just not fair! Why should this awful brother who's treated the family like dirt and put everyone through hell, why should he be welcomed straight away with such enthusiasm and joy?

But I'm sure we've been asked this question a thousand times before. I think of more interest to me is the question of how this family functions, with a father as wasteful as this. Because after all, the real prodigal in the parable, is the father! Wasting what he has left on a son who doesn't deserve it. And on the lips of Jesus, the picture of this family is a picture of Israel – a picture of how the nation, how the community, could work.

This is inclusivity at its best! Now of course, nowadays we like to think of ourselves as inclusive.

I wonder which we are? Are we an inclusive church? Or merely a tolerant church? Of course, it is not up to us to answer that question. Not long after moving from Somerset to a little village in the fens, the nearby town of March was voted the least welcoming place in the country. For outsiders moving in, the Cambridgeshire town of March was supposed to be most unfriendly to outsiders and strangers.

And of course, the Media leapt on the town, and interviewed the inhabitants. And one of them summarised the situation perfectly: a woman who said more than she intended – “I don’t think we’re unfriendly. If people make the effort to speak to us, we’ll speak to them.” Asking members of a community, whether or not they are an inclusive community – is pointless – because the community’s self-perception will only be valid, if it really is an inclusive community! Inclusivity nowadays is a brand, a trendy virtue we like to think we model. It’s rather like open-mindedness for individuals, the majority of closed-minded people genuinely believe they are open-minded.

In a community, it’s always pretty difficult to say that we are this or we are that. Some people will experience the same community in a totally different way to others. It seems unwise for any community to declare its own character to the world – when individuals do that – it seems to suggest a lack of emotional intelligence (unless you’re filling in a job application!)

But there are questions we can ask ourselves about whether we are genuinely inclusive – or whether we are merely tolerant. An inclusive community is one that is willing to have its own character, its own reason for being, its own most treasured habits – challenged by welcoming the outsider. A tolerant community, is one that is happy to welcome diverse people from all manner of backgrounds – in the knowledge that we are right, and they must conform with our current, superior and better informed ways of being.

A tolerant community, will tolerate all manner of people as part of the church service – in the safety of the church building – where you can keep yourself at a safe distance from those who disturb you. An inclusive community, will exercise hospitality to the point of inviting people back to their homes or deeper into their lives – not only like-minded people, but people who have the potential to be more disturbing. Do we welcome the stranger only into our church life, and not into our social life?

A tolerant community will welcome people into decision making bodies, but has unwitting patterns of behaviour in place to prevent the awkward person being heard. We see this in recent governments’ public consultations: where people are invited to feel that their voices have been heard, even if those voices are ignored. An inclusive community can make room in its agenda’s for the voice of the outsider – who, after all, may well bring the voice of Christ.

A tolerant community will protect its current habits and priorities at all costs – and outsiders will be welcome as long as current habits of worshipping together, of meeting together and eating together are not questioned. An inclusive community is secure enough to allow its current habits to be questioned by newer members coming in.

A tolerant community will be keen to be perceived as an inclusive one.

An inclusive community has no need to claim anything of the sort.

But really – it's not up to members of a community to decide how they are to be described. The biblical word for that is hypocrisy! I wonder if our responsibility is rather to look at this father, to see what he sees and feel what he feels.

The question we can legitimately ask ourselves, is perhaps not whether we are inclusive or not. But whether we share something of this Father's experience of advent – of waiting and longing and hoping – and most importantly – of welcoming. After all, when Jesus told this parable – it was to show something of what God himself was really like. A God who welcomes sinners and eats with them.

This is a wasteful God. The God who waits and longs and hopes for his people to come to him.

This is a loving God, who doesn't only love those who deserve his love. This is a God who waits, and sees and runs, and sacrifices his dignity and throws his arms around someone who deserves nothing but his condemnation.

This is a God who does not recognise social conventions. He doesn't seem to know that the head of a household does not run in public. He doesn't seem to know that by giving in the way that he does, he brings shame on his household. He doesn't seem to know that people will think less of him if he entrusts his riches to a wayward son. He doesn't seem to know that everyone will think he's stupid if he welcomes that son back.

This is a God who doesn't know that you're supposed to get a good degree, then a job in the city (or in a charity – depending on your political persuasion). Then start buying a house, then start having a family and a mortgage and seek security. This is a God who doesn't know how to advance himself in terms of status and reputation.

This is a God who welcomes those who genuinely come to him. And this is a God who does not shake hands with his son, until his son has pulled himself together. This is a God who welcomes the sinner right into his life and home and family and household. And not only that, but a God who doesn't know any other way of being. And not only that, but a God who is full of joy at welcoming these people.

And it's pretty hard to have any glimpse of the biblical picture of this God, and not to conclude that this God's household is an inclusive community. And I wonder, back to Advent – back to us awaiting the one who comes – if God can welcome sinners, can we even welcome the one who is sin-less? Can God look at us now, in our worship – and see an inclusive community?

Does God look at us, and our church, and our lives – and say to himself “that reminds me of me!”

Because here, and now – in worship – this is God who invites us to do just that! To enter so fully into his being, that we cannot help but glorify him – which literally means, we cannot help but reflect his character in the world around. This is advent. And we are invited to be on tiptoes, like that father, scanning the horizon – waiting, hoping, longing for the one who comes to us.