

## THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL FATHER

Joshua 5. 9-12  
2 Corinthians 5. 16-21  
Luke 15. 1-3, 11b-32

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Today's parable used to be known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son; but of course, his *prodigality* (that is, his extravagance) is only part of the story, so it is now usually called the Parable of the Lost Son. And that is appropriate, as it comes after two other parables about things lost and found – the lost sheep and the lost coin. In each of those stories, our Lord makes one key point: 'there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents' (Lk 15. 10). In other words, God is always pleased to find a person who is 'lost'.

As we re-read this very familiar parable, we see that the younger brother first of all claims things that are not his: he asks for (and even demands) money, opportunity and 'freedom' from family responsibilities. In doing this, he is not acting commendably. In effect, he is telling his father that he wishes he were dead. And for most people (and particularly in Middle Eastern culture) that is an unthinkable thing to say. The son has denied his father's claim on his love and loyalty, and has effectively cut himself off from the family. From now on, his family will consider that he is 'lost'; and indeed, the whole community will regard him as a non-person, and will expect his father to do the same.

Matters are made worse when the son goes away into Gentile territory and squanders all that he has been given. He loses the family money, loses his sought-after freedom and 'opportunities', and is reduced to poverty and homelessness. Having already disgraced his father, he disgraces himself by associating with those notoriously

unclean creatures, pigs. He has lost everything: the home and the father he himself rejected, the wealth he briefly enjoyed, and now his self-respect and dignity. He almost loses his life. But as our text tells us, he ‘came to himself’. This being said, some of us may still be wondering if it is genuine penitence that drives the son home. Perhaps he selfishly chooses to return to his father because he hopes to gain his pity and to be given some employment.

The miracle is that the father’s generous love and compassion clearly supersede any hesitancy or mixed motives on the son’s part. When the father sees his son at a distance, he runs to welcome him. He doesn’t wait to hear what his son has to say for himself, but rather embraces him (though as Spurgeon the Victorian preacher commented, no-one would have been surprised if he had kicked him). We may not grasp the enormous surprise caused by the fact that the father ran; apparently, this is still regarded as totally inappropriate behaviour for a respectable older man in the Middle East. The father takes the risk of making himself appear ridiculous in the sight of the world;<sup>1</sup> and that for a wastrel son, who has disgraced the family name and who should be banished rather than welcomed.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible, however, that the son’s words to his father are genuine, and the lost child has been found and has changed. Perhaps he really does know he is not worthy to be the son of such a father; and despite this, accepts the love, the gifts and the celebration. He has done nothing to deserve them, but his father’s generosity overrides that.

This parable points to the true nature of God, the one who does not wait for us to come to him, but who goes on searching for the lost sheep and the lost coin until he

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<sup>1</sup> The reaction of the people who heard Jesus’ parable would have largely been one of astonishment; most of them were driven by social pressures and the desire to conform, and especially to avoid any cause of shame. Christ is challenging that way of life in this story, which is surprising, but intended to sow the suggestion that there is another way of behaving; and that that is in fact God’s way.

<sup>2</sup> There was even a ritual called *Kezazab*, during which a clay pot by would be broken by his family before him, as the acted out sign that their relationship was broken.

finds them; and who runs to meet his lost children, even if they are only moving towards him in a half-hearted, hesitant way. Whenever God finds the lost sheep, coin or child, there is great joy and celebration.

This parable also has something to say about our relationship with God. We can easily assume that we have to earn his love. In spite of the fact that we know in our heads that salvation is a gift of grace, perhaps some of us still assume that there are things we have to 'do' in order to earn acceptance from God. But the only thing that we actually have to 'do' is to recognise and accept God's love for ourselves.

We cannot leave this parable (which by the way, I would like to call the 'Parable of the Prodigal Father') without paying some attention to the older brother. It is easy to criticise or judge him; but perhaps we should first try to understand him. His problem is that he has always been the 'good' son, and that can be a real burden. For by doing everything his father asked him, he may have received approval, but he may also have experienced those dangerous swings between feeling self-righteous ('what a good boy I am') and feeling guilty or inadequate ('I just can't do enough; I just can't get it right.')

The hope for the older brother lies in his being able to recognise his own need and his own loss. For it is clear that he had lost any sense of love and joy in life. For him life is all about duty, and not about relationships. He has lost any relationship with his brother (whom he calls 'this son of yours' in addressing his father); and he has also lost any relationship with his father, whom he has served but not loved. His father expects the older brother to play his part in the celebration over the younger brother's return, but he cannot. He has lost all ability to rejoice in that homecoming.

Note that the father is again ready to lose face by leaving the other guests in order to plead with (and not 'order') his older son to come and join them. The parable

seems to end on that note. It appears that the good brother is so closed in his attitude that he resists his father's generosity. But Jesus actually leaves us with an open ending to the Parable of the Prodigal Father. What do we think happened next? Is it in fact possible that the father's warmth melted the heart of his older son? Did the older son acknowledge that he had forgotten and lost sight of his father's love? Did he allow himself to be changed?

That was surely our Lord's point in telling the story, which by the way was overheard by the Pharisees and the scribes, who at the beginning of Luke 15 are portrayed as 'grumbling' and critical. Remember, the Pharisees and the scribes were not bad people; their problem was that they were good in the wrong way, and for the wrong reasons. They thought it all depended on them and on their efforts; and they had lost the true message, which is that God is the God of love; and that he is the God who runs after his people even when they turn away.

Now, what about us? How does this parable touch us and affect us? It might be helpful to ask ourselves whom we most identify with in the story.

Do we see ourselves in the older brother? Have we always acted rightly and responsibly? Perhaps we feel even a bit smug about ourselves, and think secretly that God owes us something extra for our faithfulness! For those of us who are like the older brother, we may need to ask ourselves if we see our relationship with God as one that is primarily about duty and responsibility. If this is the case, our vision of God needs to be revised. May the love of God touch and melt our hearts, so that we can see him for who he truly is.

Or do others of us see ourselves in the younger son? We may feel lost in some way; or we may be profoundly aware of opportunities that we have lost. If this is the case, our God invites us to come back home, to come back to him, to accept his

love and to allow him to restore what we have lost. Yes, no matter how we feel, this is indeed possible.

The Parable of the Lost Son is possibly best-loved parable out of all of our Lord's parables in the New Testament. I hope that we have understood by now that there are, in the end, no 'lost causes' in this story; because the Prodigal Father loves us all!

Amen.