

**St Aidan's Uniting Church, Narrabundah / Wesley Uniting Church,
Canberra**

Sunday 18 March 2007 Lent 4

Sermon

Joshua 5: 9-12

Ps 32

2 Cor 5: 16-21

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

The Prodigal Son

Text Luke 15: 24

“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”

The account of the Prodigal Son only occurs in Luke. It must be seen clearly within its own context. That is set out in the first three verses of our reading.

Because Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners, and the scribes and pharisees are grumbling about that. When Jesus eats with outcasts, it is not just humanitarian broadmindedness, or a cavalier disregard for religious laws. It is God breaking through God's own traditions in order to reach out and save those who have broken them. Jesus takes his place alongside sinners in the place that they are, in order that they might come close to God. Then Jesus tells three parables. The first is about the lost sheep versus three (3) to seven (7). The second about the lost coin, versus eight (8) to ten (10) and then the third parables, our a parable, the Prodigal Son versus 11-32.

A number of issues need to be born in mind. First, the issue of what a parable is.

A parable as we know from Mark, 4:10-12 is a story about the nature of God, which radically confronts you and has the effect of changing your whole outlook on life.

In John's gospel, it is the “I am” sayings of Jesus like “I am the way the truth and the life” which confront you and change you. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is the parables. So this prodigal son story is going to confront us and change us.

Second, we need to look at the background to this prodigal son story. It is primarily about the extravagant love and grace of God towards us. The father in the story is excessively extravagant toward his younger son, bordering on being imprudent and foolish according to the apocrypha book Ecclesiasticus, or, the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach 33: 19-23. The apocrypha is made up of the later writings at the end of the Old Testament period, which do not have the theological and authoritative status for the church of the books of the Old Testament. However, they are of vital importance in understanding the world of the Old Testament. In Ecclesiasticus it says a father should not give inheritance to the son before his death, from which we, in modern times, gain our understanding of inheritance and the preparation of wills.

He doesn't just give his inheritance to his first son, the natural heir, he is so extravagantly generous as to give it to his second son. This second son goes out to a foreign country and wastes his money. Pigs were especially shameful and unclean according to Leviticus 11: 7-8.

The father's compassion is overwhelming. He runs to the second son before he has made his confession. He runs out to meet him. He gives him a ring, a sign of authority. He is then confronted by the angry elder son. He holds the high moral ground of obeying the law. He doesn't even call him brother, but this son of yours. But the father says: "your brother". But the father has not deprived him of any right, nor deprived him of any love. It is simply that the father's compassion is overwhelming towards the lost.

In Christian theology, and especially in the Protestant tradition, this has been a very important parable and it has three major teachings.

First, it speaks of the unrestricted grace and love of God towards humanity and especially towards those who are outcasts. In this, theology has seen the elder brother as the Jew and the younger brother as the Gentile. The message of Christ is the overwhelming love for the outsider. For the despised and for the rejected. This kind of theology has very heavily influenced the Uniting Church in its relationship to government through its community services work. It has also caused the Uniting Church internal theological struggles about those members who some people would consider to be outcasts within our midst.

The second point began in the interpretation of Martin Luther and has been important in theology both in Calvin and in Wesley and subsequently. Luther uses the phrase *simul justus et peccator*, which

means at the same time justified and a sinner. Luther also uses another line that all people must be damned before they are saved. What Luther means by this is that unless we are like the prodigal, we cannot be saved. Because we, if we are like the elder brother, have no need of God. We have to feel completely abandoned and then we are loved and forgiven. The phrase is often expressed in the hymn “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.”

Third, Karl Barth takes this to the further theological point, based on Luther and Calvin, in Church Dogmatics 4/1, 59.1 entitled “The Way of the Son of God into the Far Country”. What Barth says here is that Jesus became the prodigal for us. In the Incarnation, he comes into the far country of our lives. This world is the far country for God, our world of sin. Jesus comes into the far country and then returns to the father. He, although a Jew, chooses to be a Gentile as the beginning of this passage says – he eats with publicans and sinners. He chooses to be irreligious and to associate with the wrong people – with unclean pigs. We are the unclean pigs with whom Jesus associates. He chooses to be the Second Son although he is actually the First Son. He is truly human. He then returns to the Father. And we, in him, are brought back to the Father. We return to the Father. So, this act of grace on behalf of the Father towards us is only possible if we see our need for grace and also realise that our need for grace only comes in Christ. The parable shows that Jesus entire ministry was tied up with his crucifixion.

This leads onto our final conclusion.

The church is the body that lives in rejoicing. It is the body that lives in rejoicing just as the father has prepared a banquet for the prodigal son. A kind of infectious joy, for all people. Because it is the joy of those who have been saved that do not deserve to be saved. It is not judgemental, but a body that gives hope. It therefore lives out what Paul speaks about in 2 Cor 5:16-21. The Church is a body of reconciliation, where those who have been enemies, become friends and part of the one body. So we have to pray for our enemies. For Ireland, for example, this means for Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams ...

Our identity as Christians is based on being a new creation and a reconciled community. For the same reason, the division of the churches is scandalous.

Where all these prodigals coming home can not behave as if they are the elder brother. Moreover, we are ambassadors for Christ and are

therefore called in a new humanity to speak only of the joy of love in these circumstances.