

Lent 4 – 9am Wesley – 10th March 2013

Reading: Luke 15:1-3 & 11b-32 'The Prodigal Son'

Theme: 'Our response to God's love'

Introduction

Today's Gospel is a well-known parable, that story of the Prodigal Son who returns to a loving, forgiving Father. It is the last in a series of three parables that portray God as seeking out that which is lost. The two others are the parables of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15: 4-7 and the parable of the Lost Coin in Luke 15: 8-10. The beginning of chapter 15 states that Jesus told these three stories in response to a complaint raised by the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious leaders of the Jews, against Jesus associating with sinners and tax collectors. The parables attempt to show that Jesus had no other choice than to seek the lost.

There are three principal characters in this parable. The son who takes his inheritance and blows the lot, the loving father who never gives up on his wayward son and the brother who is peeved and angry that his miscreant brother is received back into the family fold by his father.

We need to balance these three images that we are given because each has an important role to play and without giving due emphasis to each we can unbalance what Jesus was trying to teach through his story. So let us look at this passage of Scripture and then reflect on it for ourselves.

Luke 15: 1-3 & 11b-32

The parable begins by relating the shameful actions of the younger son towards his father. The younger son demands his inheritance even before his father's death which is like insulting both his family and his father. This would have been unbelievable in Jewish society in Jesus' day and the thought of selling land that had been handed down for generations and was seen as a gift from God made this action doubly horrendous. Yet surprisingly the father accepts this and does it. The older son is silent at this point in the story but we can imagine his thoughts – not happy!

The younger son ventures away from home with his portion of his inheritance from the sale of the family land that had been sold. He enters into a lifestyle that is abhorrent, squandering his inheritance in high living.

The crisis on which the story turns is the famine in the foreign land where the younger son had gone. With no money to sustain himself he hires himself out to Gentiles as a swine herd keeper. Again an anathema to the Jews for pigs were seen as unclean and to be lowered to not only looking after them but to also eat their swill to survive was horrific. This leads the younger son to realise that his father's hired hands were much better cared for than what was happening to him. In a sense he had to 'eat his pride' and return home seeking work as a servant rather than a son.

The story moves back to Palestine and to his father as the younger son returns home. Usually a father in this instant would feel so shamed by his son that he would disown him. However here the unexpected happens. The father on seeing his son in the distant runs to him. Again an image that would have grated with the conservative Jews. The father should have waited for the son to come to him and seek forgiveness but the father is so overjoyed that he runs to his son. Give the younger son his due. He says to his father in vs 21

“Father I have sinned against heaven and before you;
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

However the father embraced him back into the family saying:

“Quickly bring out a robe – the best one- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate.” Vss22-24

What a home coming for some-one who was totally ‘down and out’. While he sought forgiveness his father had forgiven him almost before the asking and the younger son is fully restored to within the family. It is into this celebration that the older son comes and is NOT happy with the festivities. Again we see the father reaching out to his older son. The father leaves his guests – something that you didn’t do back then to talk with his older boy. He explains to his older son saying:

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

With those words the parable ends and we do not know the final outcome of the parable in regards to the older son.

It is as if Jesus was asking the Pharisees and the scribes if they were going to join him in reaching out to their wayward brothers and sisters and if they were going to rejoice and celebrate with him over God’s amazing mercy, forgiveness and love.

The reconciliation between father and son only happened because of the father’s action, even though the younger son did seek forgiveness. We do not know about the elder son. That is part of the parable story.

What has this parable to say to us today?

Firstly, in this season of Lent, we are reminded of the graciousness of our loving, forgiving God. Desmond Tutu put it this way:

“We are always justified and we are always sinners. We depend not on our goodness, but on the gracious mercy of God.”

Secondly, we are reminded that we need to seek forgiveness as we certainly are not the perfect people God would want us to be. If we come humbly to our God, almost before we say the words God forgives us, in a sense wraps his arms around us and welcomes us back into the faith community and celebrates our return. What an incredible thought!

Thirdly, this parable challenges us to include people that we might find hard to accept, for whatever reason. It speaks to us about having an openness that includes others rather than precluding them. This is not easy, particularly for those who have been around the church for some time and are happy with their circle of friends and the way things are. However, this parable, I believe, reminds us of the need to be open and accepting of others, to include people and to allow changes to occur as we bring new people into the family of God. Not an easy thing but something for us to think about. How do we welcome people and how do we make people feel welcome or not!!

Fourthly, on an even more personal note, how do we seek to meet the needs of others on the fringe of the church or even on the fringe of society? Where are we involved with such people and how do we seek to bring the love of God to them?

Finally, do we accept the forgiveness that God offers to us? A very basic question that many people struggle with. Yet this parable teaches us of the joy of forgiveness and encourages us to accept personal forgiveness that allows us to forgive others.

Henri Nouwen in his book "The Road to Daybreak" writes:

"Maybe the reason it seems hard for me to forgive others is that I do not fully believe that I am a forgiven person. If I could fully accept the truth that I am forgiven and do not have to live in guilt or shame, I would be really free. My freedom would allow me to forgive others seventy times seven times. By not forgiving, I chain myself to a desire to get even, thereby losing my freedom."

In this season of Lent may we know the joy of forgiveness and may we celebrate with those who enjoy being part of a forgiven, faith community, open and welcoming to others with no reservations. Amen.