

Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Lent 4 – 9am Wesley Worship – 6th March 2014

Theme: ‘The joy of knowing we are truly forgiven, ‘no strings attached’.’

Reading: ‘The Parable of the lost son or the forgiving, loving Father’

Luke 15:1-3 & 11b-32

Text: “But while the son was a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” Luke 15: 20

Introduction

For any time of the year, but particularly in Lent, this is a wonderful parable of forgiveness, compassion, love and re-building of relationships that have broken down. In my first parish, which was in the country, I had this very parable ‘played out’, in reality, for a particular family. Their son and heir, there was also a daughter, said to his parents, I do not want to be a slave to the land all my life like you have been, give me my inheritance now and I’ll leave you in peace and move to the city. Reluctantly they sold a portion of their farm and gave him the money and he moved out and made a life for himself in the city. Years later, he requested the possibility to come back to the farm and to help his father who was not getting any younger. However, in this true story, the father said ‘No’ – his response was: ‘I’ve given you your inheritance and now we are finished with each other.’ It was into this scenario, in their lounge room, that I read this parable of Jesus to this couple. Their response was predictable: ‘That’s a parable from Jesus to the people of his time – it’s not relevant to our situation!’ I suggested it was most relevant to our time. We agreed to disagree but I left the parable with them. I would like to think there was a happy outcome to that real scenario but I don’t know the final outcome there.

Here we have the parable for ourselves today.

Luke 15:1-3 & 11b-32

There are a number of points I’d like to make on the passage.

- This parable is the third parable in Luke 15, and all of them deal with something ‘lost’ – a sheep, a coin and a son. The beginning of chapter 15 states that Jesus told these three stories in response to a complaint raised by the Pharisees and scribes concerning Jesus’ penchant of associating with people known to be sinners. The parables attempt to show that Jesus had no other choice than to seek the lost.
- There are the three principle characters in the story of the lost son. A father and his two sons. The actions of each are significant. The parable begins by relating the shameful actions of the younger son towards his father. Not only does the younger son reject the value of family solidarity, but he demands his inheritance before his father’s death, which is seen as a gross insult to his father. Surprisingly this father allows this and his older brother voices no objection either to his behaviour or to how he treats his father. This comes only later.
- The inheritance the younger son demands would have meant a selling of some of his father’s land and presumably his livestock. Jesus’ audience would have been shocked as much by the son’s squandering of his money as well as to the presumed sale of the land. The ancestral land was seen as a God given gift and not something you sold lightly or squandered the money from such land sale. This was integral to Jewish society and so Jesus’ parable would have shocked his listeners in

a way we do not fully understand today, except through our indigenous brothers and sisters who are so tied to the land here in Australia.

- The son becoming destitute and working with pigs and eating their swill, was also horrific to the Jews. Pigs were seen as unclean animals and eating their food was eating unclean food – an outrage to strict Jews.
- The homecoming was again outrageous. An aggrieved and shamed father, would not have accepted back his son, but would have totally disowned him. So again the welcome and the banquet for him was not expected by the listeners of the parable.
- The older son's jealousy and resentment towards his younger brother consumed him and we do not know if there was ever reconciliation between the father and his older son or not. This is left totally unresolved by the parable and is left up to the listeners to work through. It is as though Jesus is asking the Pharisees and the scribes if they are going to join him in reaching out to the wayward brothers and sisters, if they are going to rejoice with him over God's most gracious mercy, or if like the elder brother, will they refuse to enter the banquet room, preferring to be outside, thinking of nothing except their resentment over the reconciliation between God and sinners that Jesus came to effect.

Reflection for ourselves out of this parable.

In our first Lenten Bible Study there was a section on 'prevenient grace'. That is, grace or love from God that is present even though we do not realise it is present. It is working away behind the scenes, preparing the way for us to follow Christ, even before we first realised it. It is present all the time, and is reflected in the words,

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but to save the world through him.' John 3:16-17

In a sense, this is what this parable is talking about.

Behind the parable lies a profound and overwhelming truth about God and God's love for us all. Before we knew it, God reached out in the people Israel and then in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God is constantly reaching out to us and calling us to be those who are the faithful. This is occurring all the time and we are called to share this amazing love with others.

In 'God has a Dream', Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes"

"I have a dream, God says. Please help Me to realize it.
It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty,
its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation
and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts,
when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will
be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing.
I have a dream that swords will be beaten into ploughshares and spears into
pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family,
the human family, God's family, My family."

Suddenly this parable comes alive for us today. May we further reflect upon this passage both for ourselves, our lives, our family and our parish as we seek to rejoice in the forgiving love of our great God. Amen.