

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. **2** And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

3 So he told them this parable:

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. **12** And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. **13** Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. **14** And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. **16** And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! **18** I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" **20** And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. **21** And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' **22** But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. **23** And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. **24** For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. **27** And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' **28** But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, **29** but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' **31** And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32** It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Intro:

Jesus told precious stories to describe things beyond easy understanding. He told stories to get beyond the limits of words and paint pictures that could change everything we thought we knew. He told stories for their power to infect and transform our thinking with new vision.

We have just heard a gem and perhaps his most powerful description of God's heart for his children, particularly his lost children.

I assume that the story is familiar at least in outline and yet, Jesus may not yet have been fully heard? I know for myself that it keeps speaking as if I need to hear more.

I am not going to retell the story but take us to what I hear as the heart of it.

Let's begin with a few questions:

Q1. So what would you consider the red-hot centre of this story? Where is the big shift?

Q2. And then, in light of that, What moment are you rooted in the point you live out from it? Is this in some way your story?

Considering?

I am going to suggest that the pivotal moment that is the lost son coming home to discover the Father's love and grace. That is the explosive moment that makes sense of the whole.

That is where I live in and out of as my spiritual home-base - as a child of our heavenly Father God enjoying his love.

There is more than personal taste or preference in my determining this.

Luke records Jesus saying in 19:10 that he, “came to seek and save the lost.”

So, it is not surprising that in chapter 15 we find three stories of lost and found.

As we heard read today in the first 3 verses of chapter 15 these stories were spoken into a specific context. Among those hearing Jesus the religious professionals described as ‘Pharisees and Scribes’ were having difficulties with Jesus because as a supposed ‘holy man’ or respected ‘Rabbi’ he was welcoming obvious unholy people and known disreputable sinners and eating with them.

What they saw Jesus doing did not sit with their model of holiness which was about separating from the unholy, the unclean and the defiled to avoid being contaminated. They thought God was pleased with this approach and so Jesus was confusing them.

So in Luke 15 Jesus patiently tells three stories about lost and found to help them re-orientate: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin and The Lost Son each to illustrate heaven’s joy over finding those lost.

A recent example

Rosaria Butterfield was a professor of literature at an American university and a practicing lesbian advancing that cause. Through polite contact, then hospitality and long conversations with a Presbyterian Minister and his family, she came to faith in Jesus Christ. Her comment on this is that “She was not saved from lesbianism. She was saved from being lost.” Whatever else she had going on her basic issue was one of being lost. At some point in her long dialogue with Christians she realised that as her basic issue.

The Story

So let’s check this out in the story we know.

The Younger Son had a life map: Live like there is no tomorrow. Live for pleasure, get what you can when you can. Philosophically Epicurean, Hedonist, Consumerist and quite contemporary. I want it all and I want it now!

He does not particularly value relationships. People should be fun so as there is precious little fun at home on the farm with Pa and the Big Brother he wants out, preferably with funding.

So he forms his first plan and demands his inheritance without relationship to get out and away. His message to Dad -as first hearers would have appreciated- was:

“You are more use to me dead than alive so give me my inheritance now and not when you die.”

This was a shock horror moment for any audience in a traditional honour-shame culture.

Yet, curiously this Father obliges, Middle-Eastern Patriarch that he is.

You know what happens next. He blows it on high and loose living.

Funds run out, famine comes and he ends up feeding pigs, Pigs! on a farm.

This is shock horror moment #2 for the first Jewish audience for whom pigs were defiling.

On that pig farm something significant happens as never before: (v.17) “He comes to himself.” or, “He came to his senses.”

C.S. Lewis famously described pain as ‘God’s megaphone’.

Without pain we are capable of great self-deception, delusion and general madness.

It’s a trap of affluence and comfort all around us.

Hunger and deprivation can lift the lid on reality very well which happened for him while feeding pigs.

So from v.17b we read he begins to form a plan- Plan B. He was now going to humbly and contritely return and appeal to his Father for mercy to end his suffering.

Towards this he carefully prepared a speech and started walking back to his Father's house.

I imagine it was a long journey for the son with tension building in anticipation.

Meanwhile the Father had been waiting, regularly scanning the distance for any sign of this son's return.

This brings us to the heart of the story and what the Scribes and Pharisees needed to comprehend with the eyes of their hearts.

The Father recognises the walking form in the distance as his younger son - but moving slowly. The Father's eyes strain and his heart begins to race as he concludes, yes, it's him!

At that point a bomb goes off and pent up compassion floods the Father's heart to the point where he does something very, very unusual for any dignified patriarch, he runs.

He hitches his robe and trots or patters as best he can towards the object of his compassion.

Ankles and knees may have been exposed here? Those watching would never forget.

Some people suggest this was a Jesus joke in the middle of the story at which some may have chuckled? If so it was a wise joke that would be remembered.

The Son has better eyesight and sees clearly who is coming as his father. The next moments would be determinative so he lines up his words again ready to make the apologetic and appeasing plea for mercy to an offended patriarch and an end to his hunger and misery.

We were told that in the pig pen he came to his senses.

That process is about to continue because his ideas about his Father are not in touch with the reality that is running towards him. He may have been expecting a cool reception and little opening for his practiced humble appeal. He may have expected to be kept waiting.

Instead we read that the Father closed the gap with embraces and kisses.

With difficulty in the embrace and the kissing he gets a few words out:

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

These words are left to drift in the air as if not heard.

The compassion of the father has bounded over expected formalities of reconciliation and hard conversations:

He has his lost son in his arms. So instead of talking through the issues or dealing with the body odour,

²² ... the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

The boy back, the returning one is embraced, kissed, dressed, fed and celebrated.

Reflection

This is the heart of Father God for his lost children, waiting and celebrating their return to him.

The story describes the most wonderful sacred space open to those who turn to God. This space is Gospel Central powered and governed by the Father's compassion.

This is a story, a parable, but in real life I suspect a returning prodigal would take a while to digest and grasp this experienced revelation.

As mentioned before, he made good progress on the pig farm towards appealing to his Father's mercy and even if limited mercy, but now he was coming to terms with abundant overwhelming grace.

John would say it in his first letter: God is love. The younger son was now experiencing this and knowing his Father as such.

This is my Father loving me because he loves me and not because I come in low enough to beg for the mercy he deems to afford me.

This was his defining moment. This was the moment he first really met his Father, an atom splitting moment of transformation for the young man. Everything changed even if it would take time to sink in, as it must.

This was the moment he was born-again as a son and not a tenant, a lodger or servant.

He had always been a son as all people are God's children but he had never realised that. That is essentially why we are lost.

Now he was really coming to his senses.

Indeed the servants had it good, but as a cherished son he has the Father's love without limit.

The Father's joy is over a son who was lost and dead now being found alive.

The Father would not let anything stand in the way of that.

I have followed the word 'son' but please recognise that this love is for all God's children.

It's not about male privilege but coming home.

As Jesus continues the story the attention moves to the Elder Brother who is alienated from all this in many ways.

Essentially, he is offended and confused here because he doesn't understand what it is to be a son either. He is also functioning as a servant or lodger but one who has earned his inheritance and sees it under threat.

I wish there was a sequel to this story that told how the Younger Son then lived out of this in the years to come. The sequel Jesus is interested in is us, you and I living somewhere in that story and the reality it describes.

Conclusion/ Application.

It's time to bring this into the room for us as church.

Generally, if we get Jesus and the Gospel, we will get this, right?

- We are all God's children – whether we know it or not.
- It is very possible to get lost in life
- It is returning home to God from whatever 'pig-farm' we wake up in that opens up grace and transforming love beyond what we could ever expect.

If we don't get this the story illustrates the likely alternatives: Either we join with the Younger Brother's Plan A in self-seeking hedonism and rebellion or aligning with the older brother in entitled indignation and legalism – both missing God as a compassionate Father.

The place of transforming power is in returning, coming home to God as our heavenly Father.

Jesus' first words and first teaching as found in Mark's Gospel speak this:
 God's Kingdom is at hand, So Repent and believe, Return and trust, Come back and allow yourself to be-
 embraced.

For Barbara and I we come with a specific focus for ourselves and St Matt's
 We want to live orientated to this Gospel moment in the heart of God.

We have at times heard the sound of hearts turning to God.
 We have heard the sound of prodigals coming home.
 We have seen the transforming power of God's embrace in people's lives.

We want to see and hear more of that.
 We want this to be a church where God can embrace, kiss, re-clothe and celebrate people.

We want this to be a church without 'elder brothers'
 We want this to be a church where lost people receive and connect with the Love of God.

Our roles, yours as well is to help bring people to their senses – that may be gentle, it may be firm.
 We can help people begin or continue their journey home to God – if they want to.
 Telling our story or experience of the story we have been reflecting on is a powerful part of this. So we all
 need to know our place in the story.

BUT, whatever we can do, the atomic moment of transforming power is God's work.

The space where this happens is a place Barbara and I will visit as often as possible taking the willing with
 us.

Time to reflect.

What am I hearing from God?
 What does my heart say?

Amazing Grace:

First written by John Newton in 1772 and so evidently describing the journey of a prodigal into God's
 Grace.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
 That saved a wretch like me
 I once was lost, but now am found
 Was blind but now I see

Was Grace that taught my heart to fear
 And Grace, my fears relieved
 How precious did that Grace appear
 The hour I first believed

