



God's pattern for us all

Luke 15:1-2; 11b-32

On the fourth Sunday of Lent, the set gospel for the day takes us to Luke 15. The title "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" is perhaps not the best title for this well-known parable of Jesus.

If I could re-title it, I would begin my consideration around the thought of "The Parable of the Forgiving Father". My reason for doing this would be that it points very clearly to the central matter of the parable which is of course the generous love of the father of these two boys, who were both wayward, but in different ways.

Whatever title we give to this parable, there is no doubt that it is one of the best loved and most recognisable of Jesus' parables. For me there are a number of features which give rise to its powerful impact:-

- It has a strong sense of story – a literary appeal
- It has a penetrating delineation of character
- It has an assurance of God's mercy

This evening I also recognise that it is one of those New Testament passages that has a meal at the heart of the piece and, therefore, fits very easily into the context of Holy Communion.

The Lord's Supper is not special because of our participation in the meal, but because of the One who is always the host – that is Jesus Christ himself. It is not enough simply to say Jesus has commanded us and leave it at that – for Communion is more than remembrance; it is the active realisation of Christ at the heart of life.

The parable before us is the last in a series of three parables that portray God as seeking out that which is lost. We are familiar with the parables of the lost sheep (15:4-7) and the lost coin (15:8-10).

Whenever I turn to each or all of these passages, I remind those present of the critically important introduction to the chapter, which puts the parables into a context where we can best understand them. In just two verses, we learn why it is that Jesus told these three stories. It was in response to a complaint raised by the Pharisees and Scribes concerning the people with whom Jesus was associating. One writer summed up this point by saying, "The parables show that Jesus had no other choice than to seek the lost."

It is only in Luke's Gospel that we have these three parables handed down to us. They are filled with compassion and yet we are prone to miss the purpose of Jesus telling the story, if we don't really capture the thought in those first two verses of Luke 15.

However encouraging, comforting and even liberating these words are, there is no doubt that Jesus' own purpose was to present some very self-righteous people with a particularly disturbing challenge. For this reason, the setting is so important.



If we insist on using the thought of prodigal, then we should call it “The Parable of the Prodigal Sons”. Both sons were wasting their lives; the younger son wasted his inheritance in irresponsible living and the elder son was wasting the gift of life and of building a genuine relationship with his brother, because he was too self-righteous.

Knowing that this address is in the context of Holy Communion here in the Wesley Theatre, I want to emphasise the message of repentance and faith.

We often find that the word “Repentance” causes a response within us. Repentance has been variously defined. C S Lewis in his wonderful *Mere Christianity* expresses it like this: “Repentance ... is not something God demands of you before he will take you back ... it is simply a description of what going back to him is like.”

In simple language, it is the inner-attitude that motivates our response once we recognise just who we are. The tax collector in another of Jesus’ parables said, “God have pity on me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13)

We remind ourselves of the story that Jesus presents us with. Here is a father, possibly grieving more because of the occasional rumours that may have come back from distant places, telling him of a wasted young life. Perhaps the same rumours had reached the ears of the elder son. The father watches daily for the boy’s return. Some might say, believing against all the odds that one day his son will “come to himself”. His faith is justified and one day he recognises the familiar figure on the hillside and goes to meet him. Without any questioning, he restores him to the family and all in an atmosphere of rejoicing and feasting.

At the same time that all this occurs, the elder brother simply refuses to join in the welcome, resentful of all the long years of hard work which would appear on the face of it to matter less to his father than his loose-living brother who has just returned home.

You can just imagine how the Pharisees would feel if they had found themselves identified with the older brother. They were a people who were grumbling and consumed by bitterness, made all the more acute because the crowds had appeared to go after Jesus. I recall the words of a preacher I knew well, who reminded his congregation, “If you have ever felt a little sorry for the elder brother, you are unconsciously feeling a little sorry for the Pharisees.”

In relating this parable to the thought of repentance and faith, I offer you three aspects which I hope you will find helpful:-

The need to come to our senses

A great preacher once took this parable and preached a series of ten sermons on Sunday evenings at the heart of the city of York. He opened one of his sermons with these words, “It has that sign and hallmark of all great literature: that it never palls. It may be read, in one sense, in five minutes. In another sense, it takes more than a lifetime to read.”

In verse 17, we are told, “When he came to his senses ...” There came a moment of piercing clarity when his eyes were opened:-

- Perhaps as he put a piece of carob pod into his mouth, having just snatched it from under the snout of a pig



- Perhaps it was a vivid memory. It was not so much about himself or his father, but the fact that the foot-servants were better looked after than the situation he had created for himself
- Perhaps it was his own wasted limbs that reminded him that he was starving to death

Such moments of startling self-revelation are not uncommon in human experience. It sometimes takes an experience of this kind to bring us to our senses. We have missed the mark of God's calling in our lives. If we are to enter into the most sacred mystery of God's table, then there needs to be on our part a realisation of our own sinfulness and selfishness.

The danger of talking about coming to our senses is that we seem to relate this to someone who has lost their senses in some obviously dramatic way. Our understanding of sin must not be relegated to those who might have committed some great indiscretion or whose nature is bent upon evil – selfishness and sin is something all of us have to face up to.

The work of God in Christ is directly related to our need of forgiveness for our sins. It is only as we come to our senses that we can open our hearts to the meaning of this table and receive all the riches that God so freely offers.

Many a prodigal never leaves home! He or she may sit there and take everything they can, often working hard at their own responsibilities, while selfishness destroys them from within. Whatever our situation, to come to his table, we need to come to our senses.

The need for meaningful repentance

For the one in the far country, this would clearly mean he would have to return to his father. The leaving of the far country and whatever employment was his indicates the true meaning of repentance – which is a 180 degree turnaround.

There is an increased emphasis today upon penitence, which is the sorrow for our sins – and that is healthy, but we must not lose the importance of repentance.

We receive no good from the Lord's Supper if we continue to live in the same way after Communion as before it, then we have lost its true meaning. It is not the receiving alone, but the inner-attitude of the reception.

We cannot come to the Lord's Table with spite, hatred and resentment. To be repentant means "to give up" and "to forsake".

In Old Testament days, people signified their repentance by wearing the roughest of clothing and by putting dust and ashes on their heads.

It may be sad for some younger people to hear me say that I like "The Sound of Music" but a moment in the film that is always difficult for me is when Julie Andrews sings, "Nothing comes from nothing. Nothing ever could. Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good."

When good things happen to us in our lives, they do not occur as a reward; they come because God is good. It is in his character, not ours, that we find the basis of all our blessings.



Repentance is a stabbing moment of self-revelation. Like a searchlight, it would go through the younger son's life picking out all he had done and all he had been. It is the power that enables him to say, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." (v.18).

Faith remains the key to life

It was an act of faith on the part of the younger son that he decided to go home. He believed that his father was good and merciful and knew he would not turn him away.

The father had every right to refuse admission to his table when the fattened calf had been killed, but he did not. The faith of the wayward one was rightly placed.

His father ran out to meet him, called for clean clothes, ordered a ring and had clean water brought for a bath, as well ordering that the best food be served.

We can well understand how unreasonable this would seem to the brother who had stayed at home. But it is a parable that speaks about faith. The unattractive facet of the elder brother is demonstrated in every word he speaks. (v.29)

The unworthiness of the younger son is demonstrated in the way he returned to his father. He did not say, "I have lived a good life – if anyone has a right to come home it's me!"

The prayer of humble access is a very meaningful prayer which picks up the real entrance to Holy Communion.

The gospel has a sense of paradox, in that it turns things upside down:-

- The death of Christ becomes the doorway to life
- The place of the lowest perception can be the start of something wonderful
- The way of repentance opens up the way of faith

I had a local preacher in one of my appointments who used to be a minister but chose to take up education and he became a head teacher. Frank wrote very wisely on the parables of Jesus Christ. When reflecting upon Luke 15, he wrote at length about mercy which, for him, was a consequence of faith.

He concluded his thoughts on mercy by saying, "I have stressed all this, perhaps at too great a length, because most of us find it hard to be consistently merciful. And some normally compassionate people who can be forgiving enough in a private capacity are radically changed when they don the cloak of citizenship, or sit in a church council. They display unbelievably harsh attitudes to delinquents in society, and even to people in their own churches who offend their particular values. I think the reason for this lies in the in-built resistance to mercy which is part of our human inheritance.

Yet Jesus calls us to share in the joy of God's pardoning love. As I continue in my pilgrimage, as you do, I have come to a conviction that nothing is more likely, on our part, to shut us out from the blessing of God's kingdom than the inability to forgive and be merciful."



One of the most often quoted pieces of William Shakespeare is found in *The Merchant of Venice*:-

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:

You see, it was faith in his father that got him home. There would be times when he would drop in near exhaustion and feel ready to give up. Perhaps it was the picture in his mind of his loving, gracious father that renewed his strength.

I remind you of the preacher who chose to preach for ten sermons on this particular parable. There was an enormous response to his preaching. Crowds came to hear what he had to say. Within a short period of time, five young men entered the ministry and twenty other young people began training as local preachers. Something very special was happening and nowhere does it begin better than in understanding what it is that Jesus was saying in the Parable of the Loving Father.

The final words of the parable must certainly be considered to be the strongest. In response to the attitude and words of the elder brother, the father says, "My son, you are with me always and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours who was dead is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The elder son is an example of the tragic circumstances of self-exclusion. He was filled with anger and to go in would have only inflamed his resentment. There can be nothing more difficult to understand than the blunt refusal to take the gift of eternal life. There can be nothing more painful than to find ourselves not excluded by a loving God, but self-excluding ourselves from his gracious invitation.