

Prodigal Love Meets Shared Delusion

Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent, Year C, 27 March 2022

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Joshua 5: 2-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21; Luke 15: 11-32

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I once had a complaint made about me to the Archbishop of Perth after preaching on this parable in his Cathedral. I'd conducted an ordination retreat and for some reason this was the gospel reading chosen for the ordination. It was 1997 and Pauline Hanson was new on the political scene, complaining about feckless aborigines and all the undeserved benefits they had—this was before Asians became the problem, then Muslims. Anyway, I said in my sermon that with the rise of right-wing populists like Pauline, Australia was entering the era of the older brother.

Archbishop Carnley loved it, and years later I heard him quote me—though without attribution. But someone in the congregation wrote to him complaining about me, for spoiling things by bringing politics into religion. But I'm afraid that this is a parable and it's meant to be challenging, upsetting our normal way of seeing things, and I'm sure Jesus knew that some of his hearers would find it offensive. Jesus is trying to shock the older brothers, or older sisters, among us because they're the ones with the bigger spiritual problem.

We Christians like to identify sin with the body, with dissolute living, which is what the younger brother represented—as irresponsible and unthinking as an obnoxious teenager could possibly be. And when he'd hit rock bottom and finally came to his senses, he had no expectation of being reconciled with his father. He'd be back to the hard servitude that he'd run away from, or that he'd perceived as hard servitude, though with a much lowlier status. He'd thrown it all over, and now he was slinking back with his tail between his legs, rehearsing his prepared speech. He was a big teenager on his way out, and scarcely more mature or self-aware on his way back. But for the first time, with his guard down and his sense of high-handed entitlement all drained away, he truly *met* his father for the first time.

This man, whose kindness and patience and refusal to play the controlling patriarch had never been appreciated by the rebellious younger son, comes running down the road, hitching up his robes, his dignity thrown to the wind. The son's shamefaced return is brushed aside and his immature win/lose mindset with it. It's party time, with the younger son no doubt stunned by the loving welcome he receives.

Friends, this is what God's like. And this is the same second chance that God's people received in the desert, in our first reading today, when the covenant was renewed and a new generation took up God's promise of new life in a new land, their wandering at an end, beyond the mistakes and misunderstandings of the previous generation.

Now, as I said, we Christians like to identify sin with the body, with weakness and irresponsibility, to the extent that we call this the parable of the prodigal son. But the real problem child in this family isn't the younger brother, it's the older one. It's Mr Smug, Mr Resentful and jealous, dreaming of the prostitutes that he presumes his younger brother had been consorting with. He's not the Mr Sober and Responsible that he takes himself to be, though, because in truth he hates and resents his father, his role on the farm, and his life.

So, we see that both brothers are really the same: neither are at all self-aware, and both equally resent their father. It's just that the older one is all self-righteous and judgemental about it, completely unable to admit any wrong on his own part. The younger brother's confession on returning home was imperfect, his understanding of his cherished place in the family and the father's love was as yet unformed, but at least he was halfway there. Unlike his older brother.

He's like the smug government on the right who damns the left because of its financial irresponsibility, regardless of being a recklessly spending government itself and a sinker of unbuilt submarines; or for being soft on crime, while presidentially pardoning all the corrupt cronies and calling the January 6 rioters patriots, like Trump did. But the older brother is also well represented on the political left. He's the woke activist in the culture wars, quick to cancel anyone who might express a contrary opinion, as J.K. Rowling discovered over gender.

And this older brother is particularly well represented in our churches—most of the frustrated younger brothers have left, after all, resenting the boring ordinariness of Church on Sundays and the Christian disciplines in favour of some dissoluteness and self-assertion. It's the older brothers who've stayed, and like the one in our parable their resentment isn't far below the surface. At their worst, these are the ones showing no mercy, no quarter, no compassion, no responsibility to care for the weak, with no genuine concern for moral standards, only for self-justification at the expense of younger brothers who must of course bear all the blame. No doubt I was taken for one of those younger brothers by my offended hearer in Perth Cathedral, who missed the point of this parable entirely: that it's directed to the smug older brothers and sisters among us; that it's about sins of the spirit being more stubborn and more serious than sins of the flesh.

But the aim of this parable isn't to confront or to turn the tables—rather, it's to liberate imprisoned hearts and to enlist us as agents of that liberation. See how the older son, in all his sulking hurt and affront, stands in judgement on his father—“listen you old pig, look what you've done to my life, it's all your fault.” But the father just wears it, doesn't he? He doesn't strike back, because that just makes things worse, as every negotiator knows. He absorbs the misunderstanding, the hatred, the violence, just as Jesus does on the cross. This is what it means to say that Jesus took our sins on himself. Not to be punished in our place, as the Conservative Evangelicals insist, but to absorb all our pain and poison while holding the door open for us on Easter Day. That way we stand a chance of being freed of our self-justifying habits of mind—perhaps to meet the real God for the first time and to know ourselves. That way we might come to understand our sin for the first time, too, because we've discovered God's forgiveness for the first time.

This is what Paul means in today's epistle with that most runic and yet most wonderful line in the whole New Testament; “God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” I remember Des the builder in my first parish, again back in the 90s, coming into the vestry before church with today's epistle off the lectern, which he was down to read. He asked me if that line was a misprint: “made him to be sin who knew no sin.” “No Des,” I said, “it's not a misprint; it's the central mystery of Christian faith, and if we *get* that, it will change everything in our lives.” Des shrugged and trudged back out. I hope I was able to cast some light on that for Des in my sermon that day, just as I hope we can be enlightened here today about who our God is, what our God does, and what that makes possible for us who find ourselves being given this second chance.

And so, we come to the climax of our parable. The older brother is challenged by his father, gently but firmly. “This son of yours,” is how the older brother has described him to the father. But then the father comes back at him, no, it’s “this brother of yours.” Reconciliation with the father entails reconciliation with the brother. Mr Responsible is being challenged to take up his greatest responsibility: to be reconciled with his brother, who’ll no doubt be his responsibility one day because he hasn’t any inheritance of his own left. The older brother is being affirmed and assured that he couldn’t be closer to his father, and maybe this shock of revelation will change his heart. The father has to trust him after all, for the sake of the younger brother who still needs help and guidance.

So, friends, this is why the Church is part of the Christian package rather than an optional extra, and why its lack of perfection mustn’t be seized upon as an excuse to give up on the Church, just because we get miffed about something, perhaps, or we don’t get the attention or recognition that we deserve, or because we think we’re too good for a sinful Church, as so many people in our society think. Because, friends, it’s only through parables like this, through scriptures like this, through a sacrament like this—which is medicine for the weak and not a prize for the strong—that we’ll ever really know God, and ever really find out who we are, too. This is the God, as our post-communion prayer puts it, “who when we were still far off met us in his son and brought us home.” The alternative is that we join all those who live deluded lives, whether ours are hot sins, like those of the younger brother, or more likely cold sins, like those of the older brother.

The Lord be with you ...