

A Waiting Father

St Philip's Anglican Church
Fourth Sunday in Lent —6 March 2016
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Luke 15.11-12

Introduction

Who would have thought that a story about a fraught family would have had the effect that this parable has had on our culture and language? We still speak of 'the prodigal' and the 'fatted calf' as stereotypes of bad behaviour or lostness and return on the one hand, and celebration on the other.

This is the story about how a family suffered shame and a huge economic loss because of a young man's action. We can identify with that.

We also know how anger can tear at a family and shred it. The anger may be justified or not but it is always dangerous and needs care in its handling. This is a very fraught family that knows rebellion, alienation, and loss. The appeal of the novel and the exotic to the young man evokes anger, frustration, and arguments about rights over relationships.

Yet it also provokes the remembrance of family warmth, the joy of reunion, the experience of self-encounter, welcome and celebration. It is a slice of life as we know it.

And like all good stories it has more than one level of meaning. It has layer upon layer upon layer and our insights depend on where we are in our journey. We might identify with the prodigal in some way, or might see ourselves in the angry, bitter and frustrated son. We might find wonderment in the reaction of the father to both or puzzlement, or even abhorrence at the injustice to the older son.

The centre of Luke's Gospel is chapter 15, a series of parables or stories about lost and found. The parable of the father with two sons, one prodigal, one angry, is the clue to it all; it is the clue to the Gospel as Luke sees it, it is the clue to the ministry of Jesus and it is the central clue to being the church or the people of God.

Jesus is responding to the assertion that he welcomes sinners (15.1-2) and that by implication that action disqualifies him from being a messenger of God, for God does not welcome sinners.

Let's look first at the younger son.

The younger son

The estrangement and alienation here are palpable. The demand for his inheritance before his father's death and then liquidating it, turning it into cash, were insults of a high order. They proclaimed loudly and clearly that the son wished his father dead.

This son renounces any further claim on his father's estate probably having received about a third. Leaving was just a further slap in the face in a culture that prized care of parents and kinship. The shame and alienation are profound.

In some cultures where shame is strong, people find the action of the father puzzling. Fathers are not expected to act like this. Deuteronomy recommends the stoning of such a disobedient son. (21.18ff). So there is a mystery here already. What's with this father?

But back to the younger son. The infamy increases as he then squanders the capital (the work of other's hands). He finds himself in the pigpen, filthy and sharing their food. He is among

gentiles and is their servant. I can't think of anything more alienating for such a person. For us it might be like living in a sewer. He has now sunk to just above the expendables of Roman society; beggars and thieves. In the gentile world the rule was:

“He does the beggar a bad service who gives him meat and drink, for what he gives is lost, and the life of the poor is prolonged to their own misery.” (Plautus).

But it is here he comes to himself; nothing like hunger, and a complete self-alienation to focus the mind. He would be better off at home as a day labourer in his father's household.

It is not yet repentance, simply self-knowledge. There are still choices to be made. But self-knowledge is a crucial place to start. Self-knowledge is the place where we begin to know the Father again. We have often forgotten this simple starting point. Read all the theology books you want, but without this simple beginning we do not know the Father. Self-knowledge is the realistic assessment of where our choices have got us. Self-knowledge is the capacity to recognise that our choices have had consequences. Self-knowledge is the capacity to accept those consequences and our responsibility for them. Self-knowledge is a tender plant and at this point could be destroyed by human pride and shame.

But self-knowledge leads this person to take a risk. He knows that he has no claim on his father's property or his father's pity. He now has to risk whatever shred of humanity he has left and return empty-handed and seek a slave's role. He is prepared to acknowledge his alienation, his responsibility, his terrifying assault on his father and on God. That is repentance. He is prepared to place himself under the judgement of the father.

The father

He might have expected a harangue—"I told you so." Instead it is the welcome mat. More than that there's a party. The father runs to greet him—a most unbecoming act, in that culture. He humiliates himself by so doing. He welcomes this alienated person who had wished him dead, set about destroying his business, humiliated him for years, who has nothing to commend him, culturally.

He kisses him, puts his arm around him, clothes him, and puts on a party: "... for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

And the welcome is not stingy; robes, rings and fatted calves; and no blame, no shame, just the joy of being alive again, of being found. The story to this point portrays forgiveness, love and grace with attendant joy in vibrant human relationships.

This is the Gospel. This is the good news. But it was not good news in Jesus' day: the welcome and celebration of the return of the alienated to the fold of Israel was an affront. The lines of cultural, racial and spiritual purity were clearly drawn: Hence the response of the older brother and son.

The older son

We often forget that the real sting in the tail of the parable comes in the second part (25-32), the tale of the older brother. This part of the story is Jesus' reply to his critics, who do not like him mixing with wicked tax collectors and sinners.

The critics cannot see God at work healing people, people being transformed physically, emotionally, morally and spiritually. Instead they are self-centred and censorious; they cannot rejoice with God. They cannot see that God wants to invite in even the Gentiles and that there is plenty of room for them, too.

I know that some of us may identify with the older son and his complaint. So I have to say, “Beware!” He taps into that part of us that thinks we can make it on our own, that we are decent people, that we work hard and are entitled to what we have. In other words, he taps into our natural self-righteousness. He loves the moral high ground, for that is his place of refuge from his own inner demons.

He is angry, he is self pitying, he is self-absorbed, he is overweeningly self-righteous, and he is as rude to his father as ever the younger son was. He won’t go in, he won’t celebrate. He will stay on the outside and spoil as much as he can. He will not call the returned son his brother and he will address his father as “you”.

He will not welcome the new life; instead he wants it put out. He will bellow and complain and he will disrupt if he can. His self-absorption is total. He is as alienated from his father as was the younger son; it is just that his alienation is culturally acceptable, perhaps even approved, so that no-one regards it as alienation. It is just good common sense

Once again, the father

Look at the father’s response. It begins with a warm invitation and it ends with the truth that everything the father has belongs the older son. The younger has nothing. When the early Christians crossed the barriers, not just to Jewish sinners and tax collectors, but also to the Gentiles, the older brother resurfaced (Acts 15). Some objected strongly then as they do now. No wonder the church was in danger for its life.

And it has always been the same. When a church begins to discover new life the older brother always comes out of the closet.

Grumbling and self-absorption often overshadow celebration and joy. Bad temper and self-righteousness snuff out new life just as it begins. No story is more able to clarify what the faith is about: the resolution of alienation and lostness through compassion and welcome. Some see this as a failure of justice or of sovereignty and power. No! It is power and justice governed by compassion and welcome. That is the Gospel. It is the only way to overcome alienation and lostness.

This alienation can be remedied: from self-knowledge to repentance and rejoicing. That is the path of one son. The tragedy is that self-absorption is a very comfortable place. And Jesus leaves the story hanging: “Did the older son ever come in?”

Conclusion

Let’s end with questions.

With whom do you identify in the story?

Surely God cannot be like this?

But what if it is true?

How can we be elder sons or daughters?