

SERMON: Lent 4 10 March 2013

Joshua 5: 2-12

Psalm 52

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

Luke 15: 11-32

May our ears, eyes, minds and hearts seek your truth, O God, our strength and comfort. Amen.

What a story! Hollywood couldn't do better. The characters are straight from central casting: a profligate, ungrateful wastrel of a younger son, his fair weather friends, the goody two shoes elder brother and the incredibly indulgent father. The scenes have a movie type feel to them too, with the transition from the family home to A-list parties to the humblest circumstances imaginable for a Jewish boy: a pig farm. Then back to where it all started – the family home.

This is a powerful narrative, brilliantly told. It invites us in and encourages us to identify with the characters. As Episcopalian priest Suzanne Guthrie writes:

"I am the son returning again and again. I am the father scanning the horizon watching for the impossible and then embracing it in my arms. I am the revellers in the far-away town, I am the servants in the father's household, and I am the older brother in tears of rage, uncomprehending and exasperated."

Countless sermons, homilies, reflections and commentaries have been written on this one parable. But today I would like to look at it through the lens of the Leunig poem we have been pondering this Lent.

Let it go, let it out,
let it all unravel.
Let it free and it can be
A path on which to travel.'

The younger son certainly did that. He 'let it out' with no consideration for his family. His request to get his inheritance early was not the request of a young man wanting to make his way in the world with a little bit of backing from the family. In the culture of the time it was tantamount to saying he wished his father dead. The first people hearing the story would have been profoundly shocked by his rudeness and lack of familial respect. To add to the image of an inconsiderate and selfish young man, we are told that he then moved far away, as if to wipe the dust of the family off his feet. Or, perhaps, to a place where he felt they would not know what he was doing and therefore could not judge him. Whatever his reasoning, his decision took him far from home, far from all that had created and formed him. As he travelled the path that opened up before him, it took him to a place of utter degradation, so desperate that he was willing to consider sharing the food of the pigs. But then the path led him home – in a very different frame of mind: hungry, no longer cocky, no longer sure of his rights, willing to eat humble pie.

The older son, on the other hand, doesn't seem to have ever let anything unravel, until his anger and frustration boil over. Dutiful, fitting in to societal and parental expectations, never asking for anything for himself, it is no wonder that he loses it when he sees his father celebrating the return of his younger brother. Hasn't this wastrel already taken a significant share of the family's net worth? Hasn't he managed to insult them in everything he has said and done? And now he is being welcomed, and with a lavish party!

The father, who is clearly not a practitioner of tough love, accepts both his sons, as they are – the one who has rejected home and walked far away from it only to return, and the one who has stayed home but has not truly understood home.

For both sons have misunderstood the workings of grace. The younger comes back, either thinking that he has been so sinful that he will just take whatever is offered; or, as some have suggested, thinking he can manipulate his father into generosity by throwing himself on his mercy. Whichever interpretation of the younger son's motives you choose, the fact remains that the father's response of loving acceptance comes from deep in the father's nature. It is not determined by the son at all. All he has to do is to turn up – his father doesn't even let him finish his carefully prepared speech. It doesn't matter why he's back, he is alive and he is back, and that's all that matters.

The elder son, on the other hand, has never been away but you could argue that spiritually and psychologically he too has been far from home. Labouring under the misapprehension that he has to work hard to merit his place, he has not truly understood his father and what it means to be working with him. He distances himself from his brother and his father, calling the younger son 'your son' rather than 'my brother'. But this outburst of anger on the part of the elder brother shatters the boundaries of his limited understanding. At last he has let it out – and with anger! It is a spectacular unravelling for the dutiful son to speak to his father in these terms. Then, and perhaps only then, with the resentment and anger expressed, can he hear his father telling him how it really is: all this is for him too, any time. Everything the father has is his as well. Life is abundant, grab it, seize it, rejoice in it.

There is a great line in this wonderful parable where, speaking of the younger son, the text says, 'But when he came to himself...'. This suggests that before that moment he was not really seeing things clearly, driven perhaps by all sorts of assumptions about himself, his family and other people. The elder son too is offered this opportunity to come to himself by his father but we do not know whether he accepts it – does he realise he has misunderstood? Does he choose to join the party?

Here is where we come to the crux of the story. This parable is one of four parables Jesus tells to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling and saying 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Although we tend to hear it as a parable highlighting God's welcome to all sinners, especially those who have had lurid pasts, like the younger son, its placement in the Gospel of Luke aims it straight at the religious authorities – the goody two shoes upholders of the faith. Will they join the party? Or will they stick to their

rigid adherence to the Torah, tithing even the herbs in their cupboards, but neglecting mercy and compassion?

We can ask where it is that we are working within rules that neglect mercy and compassion. Is it the Anglican Church of Australia's reluctance to allow the ordination of gay people in same sex relationships? Is it the inability of our political parties to agree on a humane asylum seeker policy? What would Jesus be taking pot shots at if he were here with us now? Where, in our personal and communal lives, are we blocking the flow of love, compassion and mercy?

The 4th Sunday in Lent is traditionally Mothering Sunday and Laetare Sunday – so called because of the Latin introit for the day 'O be joyful'. It is a rest day from Lent – a day of feasting and celebration. It seems singularly appropriate to have this parable as our reading for the day. All of us are invited to the feast, whether we see ourselves as insiders or outsiders. Can the insiders bear to sit at the same table as the outsiders? Can the outsiders bear to sit at the same table as the insiders? Can we accept that the feast is for everyone who comes, not just the ones that we happen to believe are worthy of whose company is comfortable?

The English theologian and liturgist Janet Morley offers this Collect, which seems to fit both the older and the younger son:

God our Father
you disarm our judgment
with your outrageous mercy;
and the punishment we seek
you turn to celebration.
Lift our self-loathing,
and embrace our stubbornness,
that we too may show such fathering
to an embittered world,
through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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