

The Prodigal Son 2 – The Father

17 7 11

Almighty God,
you have broken the tyranny of sin
and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts
whereby we call you Father:
give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,
that we and all creation may be brought
to the glorious liberty of the children of God.

My text today is from the Luke's gospel chapter 15 and verse 20, 'But when he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.'

Today, as I promised last week, we are going to begin a three week exploration of the parable of 'The Prodigal Son'. Parables are stories with hidden meanings and my aim is to makes clear some of the truth that Jesus has packed into the telling. There are three main characters in the story so I'm starting this week with the boys' father.

Being a parent is not easy. Those of you who are know this better than I do. The problem surely is knowing what is best for the child you love, knowing what is the best thing to do to allow your child to become an adult, and having the courage to put what you know into practice. Not easy to do.

And this is surely the challenge to the boys' father as his younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, asks for it not at the proper time but asks for it now, right now. It is no small thing he asks. To be independent of the family, to go his own way. 'No way !' would be the easy answer. The risks are enormous; the risks are obvious. As we see from what does happen, the younger son is not mature enough to handle his inheritance. All we have is this son's request: 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' All we have is the fact that his father complied: 'So he divided his property between them'. What we don't have is what the man thought when he heard his boy's request and what he thought before he granted it or what it cost him emotionally and psychologically, let alone financially, to comply with the boy's wishes. But he did.

If the father in the story stands for God our Father then we are being shown a spiritual truth: that God has given us the ability to choose – we each have a choice; we all have free will. In this life, God is allowing us the space to go our own way, to make our own decisions, to make our own mistakes. We are not robots, programmed to act in a given way but we have minds of our own with freedom to choose how to act.

Time passes. The father waits patiently for his son's return. The thought of his lost son never leaves him. When eventually the young man does come back, the father spots him while he is still on the road, still some distance from home. It is the moment he has been waiting for. But he doesn't wait for his boy to arrive; instead, he rushes out to meet him on the road. And he greets his son by throwing his arms around him, by giving him a big hug and by kissing him.

Just so, God our Father waits patiently for our return. Just as the father waits for his son to come home, God too is waiting patiently for us to move towards him. If we do, then God will meet us on the way; we don't have to wait till the end of the journey back before we're back with him. The attitude of God is clear. His compassion for us means he is there for us as soon as we turn towards him. Our God is not a God who plays hide and seek with us but one who is always there for us, waiting to enfold us with his love and forgiveness.

And forgiveness is the final act of the boy's father that I want to focus on this morning. The boy blurts out his prepared speech about his stupidity and shame and about how he has no right any more to be called his son. But the father ignores the actual words though not their meaning. Instead of speaking to the boy, he lets what he does say it all for him. The servants are told to bring him fresh clothes of the best quality; sandals for his bare feet and a gold ring for his finger and a fatted calf will be killed for a feast to celebrate his son's return.

The forgiveness the boy's father shows his son has a physical expression in clothes for his body, sandals for his feet, a ring for his finger and food for his stomach. Compassion is embodied in these generous acts of love. The same is true of God. His compassion may be seen in what he has given us and what he continues to give: our conscious embodied lives where we are loved and can pass on that love to others.

So in the father of the parable of 'The Prodigal Son', we can see three attributes of God our Father:

- That he is a God who has given us free will to leave him;
- That he is a God who waits patiently for us to come back to him;
- That he is a God of compassion who will shower us with good things we scarcely merit or deserve.

And next week we'll turn the prodigal himself.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

17th July, 2011

H: Sermon 24: PS2

