

The Prodigal Son 3 – The Younger Son

24 7 11

O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy;
increase and multiply upon us your mercy;
that with you as our ruler and guide
we may so pass through things temporal
that we lose not our hold on things eternal;
grant this heavenly Father
for our Lord Jesus Christ's sake.

My text today may be found in Luke's gospel, chapter 15 and verses 17 – 20: 'But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off . . . '

Today let us turn from the father to his younger son. The parable of the Prodigal Son is named after him. It is a great story with universal appeal but there is an awful lot of silence in between what we told so there is an awful lot of room to speculate on what is actually going on.

Let's look at just four points in the story.

Firstly, right at the start, straight after the family is introduced 'a man who had two sons', we hear the younger brothers request: 'Father give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'

What the boy is asking is disrespectful and irresponsible. He wants what will be his now, here and now, not when it would naturally be his after his father's death. It is disrespectful because he is failing to honour his father, to treat him with the respect every father deserves from a son since a son necessarily owes his life and infant nurture to his father. It is irresponsible because he wants to translate the family land and goods into cash and instead of developing it for the good of the family, he wants to spend his wealth on himself. The boy is being selfish. So what' new?

On reflection, it is the silence that interests me. That very silence invites us to ask lots of questions:

- Why does the boy feel like leaving ?
- Is the atmosphere at home oppressive ?
- Is his older brother a pain ?
- Is he simply suffering from an excess of raging adolescent hormones ?

We can speculate as much as we want. Fact is we don't know and it is the brilliance of the parable that there is room for us to do so to our heart's content !

Secondly, let's look at what the boy does. First, the good times. Having translated his assets into cash (selling off the family silver if you like) and then taking himself off to a far country, he 'squandered his property in dissolute living'

Whatever the phrase meant then, we can make a shrewd guess as to what it might mean now: sex, drugs and rock 'n roll, not to mention cigarettes and alcohol ! Second, the bad times. There's a famine in the land; times are hard; the boy needs a job to survive; he finds work as a pigman looking after pigs on a farm – great Jewish joke that! He has reached rock bottom – from hero to zero!

Thirdly, he comes to his senses and we turn to today's text: 'But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off' It takes hunger and wretchedness and desperation to sober the boy and to make him realise what a state he's in – starving slowly death. Now he sees how much better home was. Now he knows he has screwed big time, losing the right to be his father's son The boy starts off feeling sorry for himself and ends up feeling sorry for the wrong he's done his father. Being truly sorry for what we've done is what repentance means.

Lastly, the meeting. It's not what he was expecting. His father has run out to meet him, flinging his arms around him and kissing him – all very Italian ! The boy tries to articulate his carefully rehearsed speech, words he has probably said over and over again to himself each step on his way back home. He manages to get out the first bit: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But in his father's eyes, this wretched boy

who is standing before him –ragged, dirty, hungry – is still his son, still the boy he loves no matter what he's done.

So from the son's point of view we have a story, a parable, which parallels our own wilful, sinful nature. We want to go our own way; we want to do our own thing; we can enjoy the good times; we can feel awful in the bad times; we may come to our senses; and repentant, we may come home where to our surprise we will find we are still welcome. It is a story of love, of loss, of being lost and of being found.

And next week, we will turn finally to the older brother.

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

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H: Sermon 24: PS3

