

## The Prodigal Son 4 – The Older Brother

31 7 11

Almighty and everlasting God,  
by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church  
Is governed and sanctified:  
hear our prayer which we offer for all your faithful people,  
that in their vocation and ministry  
they may serve you in holiness and truth  
to the glory of your name.

My text today is from the gospel according to Luke chapter 15 and verse 28,  
'Then he became angry and refused to go in.'

And so at last we come to the older brother, the third and final person we can  
look at in 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son'.

You all know the story: a father has two sons. The youngest asks for his share of  
the family wealth while his father is still alive. He is given it. He takes it, goes  
away, wastes it and coming to his senses, comes home to a warm welcome by his  
father who throws a big party to celebrate his return.

Which leads me to the final part of the parable, in musical terms a coda, the last  
third of the story where our viewpoint shifts from the miserable younger brother  
who can't believe his luck at his welcome, from the ecstatic father who can't

believe his luck that his younger son has come back from what felt like the dead, to the older brother who is busy working somewhere out in the family's fields.

But first a joke. Who wasn't pleased to see the Prodigal Son return? The fatted calf! Actually from today's text – 'he became angry and refused to go in' – we know that neither was his older brother.

Families are complex. How we relate to members of our family is never easy. Sibling rivalry is not a new thing – Cain and Abel; Esau and Jacob; Joseph and nine at least of his eleven brothers are just three examples from the first book of the Bible!

The two boys are very different characters: the younger – wilful, sinful, wanting to get away to do his own thing; the older – dutiful, hard-working, devoted to the land which is his inheritance. And it is on the land, working, doing his duty, that we find him when his younger brother is safely back in their father's arms.

Men can't multitask as well we know so I can understand why their father is so preoccupied that he fails to send for his older son. Whether you feel he is taking his older boy for granted is open to debate but fact is he has neglected to tell his son his brother is back.

The young man is understandably not pleased. Why the noise? Why the sound of celebration – music and dancing – the smell of meat being cooked? He asks a servant and hears the unwelcome news for the first time: 'Your brother has come,

and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound'. Annoyed, outraged, he sulks, refusing to come in so his father has to come out to him instead. What follows is uncomfortable because the older brother has a point. The floodgates of resentment are open and it all pours out with venom and bile: 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Hard words. True but not nice. The older boy is upset because he has done what is right and here the boy who has done wrong is being made a fuss of ! I can understand how he must feel: second-best; taken-for-granted.

The older brother has a problem: jealousy. He resents the fact that his younger brother is not being made to pay for screwing up ! ! ! The older brother has a problem: hardness of heart. He doesn't seem to love his father or have compassion for his younger brother. If he loved his father, he could share his father's joy, be pleased that his father is pleased. If he had compassion for his brother, he would feel sorry for the boy whom he disowns, calling him not my brother but 'this son of yours'. Sadly, the older brother is a type of person you might recognise: the self-righteous who look down their noses on anyone not as scrupulously good as themselves – in fact a classic Pharisee!

We don't know how it all ends – whether there is the promise of 'and they all lived happily ever after'. It is not that sort of story. Instead we are left with the father's

words walking a tightrope of love between his two very different boys: 'Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'

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: PS4

