

11th September 2022 – St Paul in the Park, Flat Bush

[1 Tim 1: 12 – 17; Luke 15: 11 – 32]

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the best-known stories of the Bible, and you will have heard it many times. And no doubt you will have heard many different sermons taken from this story as well. So, is there something new or different to say about it ?

Let me take the story, and, like one does with a diamond, turn it around once or twice to see what fresh ideas there might be, what telling nuances might be hidden there that just might nourish us.

The first thought is this: the father divides his estate openly, so that before he dies his sons know exactly what will be coming to them. The father doesn't have to do this. In fact it probably is a foolish thing to do, to reveal his assets so openly, so fully, to be so transparent. The point being made here is that the father is exceedingly generous and open and honest. But his act also sets up his sons, now knowing what they can expect, to wish secretly that he would die soon. The elder son really seems not to care about any of this. He can wait. But the younger son cannot: "Give me my inheritance now. I can't wait for you to die." And implicit in that is the wish that in fact his father would die. From any son, much less the younger son, to imply this to his father is a grave insult, one which this father seems to absorb.

In the course of the story the younger son, who is in a far-off country, is sent to feed the swine – feed the pigs. You have to remember that this a Hebrew boy, a Jewish boy. For him, pork is unclean, completely forbidden. To tend the pigs is equivalent to becoming alienated from his tradition, from his culture, from his values, from his customs. And so, the moment the boy agrees to do that, at that very moment, he knows himself to be an outcast from his people, from his father's house and home. All the more poignant, all the more marvellous it is therefore, that when his son returns as an outcast and a renegade, the father runs to accept him still as a son, not as an alien traitor. That's a detail not to be overlooked.

Another interesting detail is that the elder son refuses to enter the house. In that Middle East tradition this is the greatest of insults. The father has every right to bristle and banish this elder son for refusing to enter the ancestral home. But he doesn't. Once more he takes the initiative. He himself goes out to this son also and tries to win him over. Note that in every situation of insult

– the unspoken wish that he would die, the son who sold the father’s tradition down the river, and the refusal of the other son to come inside the house – the father advances and invites beyond the insult. What a revelation Jesus is making of what God is like ! What our loving God is like.

Let me now turn the story around another way. Realise what is really being said deep down. The younger son does not want a father. The older son does not want a brother. You might know people like that. I have a younger brother who has cut himself off from his family. He really doesn’t want to know us. There are lots of people who want no father, no one to answer to, no limit, no restraint, no relationship, no responsibility, no judgment. They wish their father dead, or out of their lives. Same for God, really. Don’t need God. They want to be free to do their own destructive thing. Your nightly television news is full of people like that with their sound and fury.

Then there are those who say: “I have no brother. I have no concern. No one has a claim on me.” Racism and discrimination and bias are quite natural to such people. Make it fast, make it big. Only me, only Number One really counts.

And there’s another facet to this story, as we turn the diamond a little further round. Usually we consider just three people in this. The father and the two sons. But is there not another hidden character ? And this one may be the most sinister of all. He is the crafty and cunning person who offered the job of tending the pigs to the younger son. Remember once more, this is a Hebrew boy. He is up against it. He is in a tough place, between a rock and a hard place as we often say. No money. No friends. Down and out. A stranger in a strange place. And then this fellow comes along, smiling and says: “Okay, Hebrew boy, it’s the pigs or nothing!” In short this unscrupulous man took advantage of the boy’s situation, of his plight and his vulnerability, in order to alienate him from his people, from his culture, from his childhood values, from his precious heritage. Are there really people like that ? Of course there are.

In many of the world’s large cities you will find smiling people at the bus stations stalking the runaway adolescents who get off the bus, knowing that very soon they will be desperate for food, clothing and shelter. And they will say: “Okay, boy, okay girl, sell us your body and we’ll look after you, we’ll make sure you eat and sleep. Sell your heritage, your values, all that you have been taught.” Soliciting for the pigsty happens every day. Did you see the television programme recently which highlighted the plight of some of the Pacific people

who come to New Zealand to work as migrants, as temporary workers in our vineyards and orchards ? It happens alright.

As the gospel story suggests – no, pleads with us – run away from those shadowy figures and return home, go back to your family home, to your father's house. Why ? Because there is someone there to hug and kiss you, someone unlike any human father in the world, someone who can absorb all of your insults and hurts and rejections, all those things the church calls sins, someone who, in spite of it all, will call for a celebration, and will throw a party. This is a "good news" gospel, a burst of mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation. What a fantastic God we worship !

Let me conclude with this story in modern form, which I read about recently. A youth minister was preparing to take some young people away on a camp and he was trying hard to prepare some inspirational material for them. It was very late at night and the creative juices were just not flowing. So he walked out of his house and called into an all-night cafe, in order to drink some coffee. While he was sitting at the counter three young fellows came in. They had obviously been drinking and they looked to be pretty rough characters. One of them said "Tomorrow's my birthday, I suppose I should get home." One of the others laughed at him and said: "So what." They drank their coffee and left.

After they left, the youth minister asked the waiter in the cafe: "Do those guys come in here often?" The waiter answered, "yes, they come in here every night at this time. They work in a factory close by here as night watchmen." So the young man said "I overheard one of them say that it was his birthday. How about we throw him a party?" "Okay," said the waiter, "why not. You organise it."

So Tony, the youth minister got some decorations and he asked some of his youth group to come, and he organised a large birthday cake and they spread the word around about a surprise party. And sure enough, the young fellows arrived at the usual time, only to find the cafe full of people waiting for them ! They sang "Happy birthday" to Rob, for that was his name. And Rob was so overcome when they presented him with the birthday cake that he was speechless for a moment or two. Then he collected himself and asked whether he could take the cake home instead of eating it there; he wanted to take it home so he could look at it; no one had ever given him a cake before in his whole life.

Is that not a modern version of the Prodigal Son ?

And after the party was over, there was an interesting conversation. The waiter leaned on his elbow on the counter of the cafe and looked hard at Tony. And then he said: "I bet you belong to some church." And Tony, like the father in our parable responded: "I belong to the church that throws parties for useless kids late at night."

The waiter looked at him and said: "If I could find such a church, I'd join it tomorrow."

Is St Paul in the Park that kind of church ?

The story of the Prodigal Son suggests it should be.

Bishop John Paterson