

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield
The Fourth Sunday of Lent, 14th of March 2010

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

I did a bit of an experiment this week. I went through every translation of *The Bible* I have in my house and looked at what they call the parable that we heard today. In the *Jerusalem Bible* it's "The lost son and the dutiful son". In the *NRSV* it's "The Parable of the Prodigal and his brother". In the *New English Bible*, the *New International Version*, and *The Message* it's "The Story of the Lost Son". I can almost guarantee that when all of you heard this story, you thought of it, as I do, as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son". None of these titles are part of the original text, of course, they're headings giving by translators to help us as we read. Of all of them, the *Jerusalem Bible* and the *NRSV* come closest to describing what this parable's about. This is not the story of one lost or prodigal son. This is the story of two lost brothers and a prodigal father.

In listening to this story as Jesus' first hearers did, we need to try and think ourselves into first-century Jewish society. If we listen to it as twenty-first century Australians, in a world in which children do leave home to make their own way, and fathers frequently show physical affection for their children, we miss how very outrageous the behaviour of the members of this family is. This is a scandalous story. The setting in which it's told tells us that, because Jesus is being scandalous himself. "Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" Jesus is eating not with the sort of sinners that we all are, but with *notorious* sinners, traitors, tax collectors colluding with the hated Roman occupiers, and those who had placed themselves outside the community by their violation of religious laws. Jesus is eating with the equivalent of drug dealers and terrorists. No wonder the scribes and Pharisees are horrified. But in their horror the scribes and Pharisees have missed the way in which Jesus is reflecting God. So Jesus tells them a story about a family behaving badly.

By demanding his inheritance, the younger son in this parable is telling his father, in effect, that his father is dead to him. The father's behaviour is also disgraceful, because this prodigal father agrees to his younger son's demand, and splits the property between his two sons, despite the fact that this will leave him at their mercy. Then, to make things worse, the younger son sells his share, an extremely shameful thing to do. Land was a gift from God. It was received in trust from ancestors and held in trust for descendents. In letting his son sell the land, the father dishonours himself and loses face before his neighbours. What sort of father allows his son to split up the family farm? In cultural terms the father is behaving almost as badly as his son.

As we all know, the younger son soon gets himself into trouble. He finds himself penniless in the midst of a famine, and takes the only recourse he has, he indentures himself and ends up tending pigs. To tend the pigs of a Gentile was to be about as low, as alienated, as a Jew could get. And even tending the pigs doesn't fill his stomach. The younger son comes to himself and decides to return home. We don't know whether he's truly repentant or whether he's just hungry, but he certainly has a good speech prepared: "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". And so he heads for home.

Again, we see how prodigal this father is. Seeing his son approach, the father behaves shamefully in his eagerness to welcome him. In the culture in which this parable is told, fathers were meant to be remote and distant, dignified and in charge. Fathers most definitely did not run, as Aristotle said, "Great men never run in public". But this father is nothing like the proper patriarch. He doesn't wait for his son to approach him; he doesn't listen to his speech of repentance; he doesn't chastise him. Instead, the father recognises him as a beloved son before the son has said a word. The robe, the ring and the sandals all symbolise the son's complete reinstatement. Further,

the father throws a party, signalling this reinstatement to the entire community and protecting his son from the anger his neighbours may have felt at this man whose behaviour had shamed them all.

The party is gratuitously offensive. Both Judaism and Christianity accept that prodigals can return, but they need to be penitent. There needs to be repentance and reparation; bread and water rather than fatted calf; sackcloth and ashes rather than the finest robe and a ring. This is what the son himself is prepared for, when he rehearses to himself the speech he's going to make to his father. The son is thinking in terms of sin and repentance. But the father is thinking in terms of lost and found, dead and alive.

It's the sound of the party that alerts the older brother as to what's going on. And now the older son imitates his younger brother and rejects his father. He refuses to enter and celebrate with his family; he refuses to play the proper part of the older son, greeting guests at the door. For the second time, the father leaves the house to talk to a badly behaved son, and comforts him. He could have ordered the older son to behave, but instead he reasons with him. This parable is the story of two lost sons, not just one. The younger left, and lost himself in a life of recklessness. The older stayed, and lost himself in a focus on rules and on earning his place. The younger son became an alien in a foreign country; the older son made himself an alien in his own home by believing that his relationship with his father was one of contract, in which he needed to earn his place by "working like a slave", rather than one of love.

The father responds to *both* his misbehaving sons with welcome and love: before the younger son says his rehearsed piece about sinning; while the older son is still standing outside refusing to join in the celebration. The father's love is not either/or, whatever the older brother might think. The father loves both the older and the younger brothers; welcoming the younger brother back doesn't mean rejecting the older brother who has stayed. The younger brother accepts the father's welcome; at the end of the story we're left wondering what the older brother will do. Will he be able to accept that the father can love both of them? Would the Pharisees and scribes have been able to see that God's love of tax collectors and sinners didn't negate God's love for them?

As we listen to this story, who do we think that we are? I suspect that at different times we are both. Sometimes we're the younger son, turning our back on God and on what we know to be right. In that case, we need to hear the story of the extravagant love of the God who runs to welcome us, no matter what we've done. At other times we're the older son, trapped in our own righteousness, despising those others who do not behave as well as we do, those who do not work hard and earn God's blessing, those who live lives of riotous sin. When we want God to reward our righteousness, and punish the sin of others we need, like the Pharisees and scribes, to be reminded of the relationship that father has with both his children.

Whatever the sons had done, the prodigal father continued to love them both as his sons. This meant that, no matter how much they might have denied it, they remained brothers. The father corrected the older son's description of the younger as "this son of yours," reminding the older son that the younger was "this brother of yours". This parable is not just a story about the relationship of sons with their father; it's a story about the relationship between two brothers. It's not just a parable about the way God loves us; it's also about the way in which we are invited to relate to each other. We cannot love God and despise each other. We cannot be God's children, and not be siblings of all God's other children. This is what the scribes and Pharisees had forgotten.

Whether we're behaving like the younger brother or the older, the message remains the same. God's love is prodigal, extravagant, not based on anything we do or don't do. Jesus didn't tell his listeners how the story ended. We don't know whether the older son accepted his father's love and went into the party to celebrate the return of his brother. Let us, whether we feel like the older or the younger son, accept that invitation and join in the party. Amen.