

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 19 SEPTEMBER 2010

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Luke 15: 11-31; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-22

"The Prodigal Father"

The parable of the prodigal son, as the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, will be familiar to most of you. It is a magnificent story that for some forms a summary of what is the heart of the gospel: God the Father waiting for his straying children to come home and welcoming them with unconditional loving forgiveness when they turn up.

It is the tale of two brothers: One wandering off into the big bad world, squandering his inheritance, returning when hard times fall on him. The other a hard working loyal and committed homebody who lives a life of duty and austerity in his father's house. One welcomed home with a mega party, the other jealous and unable to open his heart as wide as his father.

Some say the parable is about the relationship between Jews and gentiles. A topic that is very close to Luke's heart in other parts of the gospel. The elder son then standing for Israel having trouble accepting that God, the Father, welcomes the gentiles with open arms, lays on a feast and has the fatted calf slaughtered for them. The younger son standing for the gentiles who after centuries of wandering and squandering are starting to return to the Father through Jesus Christ.

Others say the story is all about God's forgiveness, how God's unconditional love leads him to forgive even the worst of sinners. Be it the wandering squanderers of his good gifts or the tightfisted busy bodies who assume themselves to be the only heirs of his Kingdom who find out that God's love is a lot bigger than their imagination.

I have heard it said that this story is all about the younger son and his journey through life, searching for himself, getting into all sorts of trouble and finding his home, his destiny in God, the place where he was in the first place. The elder brother the example of what happens when one fails to go and discover oneself, how one can turn into a sour spoilsport on the fringes of where life is celebrated with gusto and gladness.

And so there are many more possibilities of interpretation and explanation, probably as much depending on the spiritual or psychological condition of the interpreter as they are inspired by the many possibilities the story itself opens up for interpretation, extrapolation and the finding of some profound wisdom.

While turning the story over in my mind it was the father that caught my attention this time round. Perhaps because I am a parent of teenagers who tell me stories about their friends that are, at times, hair raising. Perhaps because I have identified with both the older and younger son and some stages in my life, but am now at a stage where identifying with the parent in the story comes most naturally.

Reading the story for the umpteenth time, I wondered about the father. About the parenting aspect of the story, and what, if we assume the father in the story stands for God, this tells us about God apart from and on top of the fact that his love is deep and unconditional.

First of all there is the letting go. For a Jewish father at that time, quite something. The younger son

basically declares the father to be dead by asking for his part of the inheritance. It was a horrendous thing to do and most fathers at the time would have refused to give any part of the inheritance at all. But no, this father is prepared to let his child go, give him half of what he's got and leave him to explore life in his own way and at his own pace. That it is not an altogether easy thing for the father shows when the son returns after some years away: The father is still keeping an eye on the road, looking in the distance, waiting for his son to return.

It reminded me of all those parents that lie awake at night until they hear a door, a car, a sign that tells them their brood has returned home and only then can go to sleep. This father had not slept for years! Always on the lookout, always waiting, always living in hope.

Was it something he shared with his elder son? Or was it a quiet, hidden longing that made him keep half an eye on the road every day, all day long?

The story tells us that God is on the look out for us. Waiting for our return when we wander away, squandering what he's given us in life, waiting for us to grow up and grow into an adult loving relationship with Him.

He then opens his arms. That is in no way a matter of course. He could have done all sorts of things, ranging from bitter reproach to icy silence. And in a way this loving acceptance and forgiveness must have been worse than all those other things.

Unconditional love, unconditional forgiveness, when one stumbles upon it, is quite hard to contend with, especially where a lot of sinning has been done and guilt and embarrassment are deep. I suspect most of us would have trouble trusting it if they encountered it in another human being. And I wonder if we can really and truly believe God to be like that: Loving the sinner that has strayed far from the straight and narrow without a word. Because in our experience it just doesn't work that way, because in our experience there will always be a catch, somewhere.

I can imagine though, as a parent, that I would, with my children, be able to do just that. Be so grateful and relieved for their return that all else would be promptly forgotten and forgiven. Perhaps that is the strength of the story: That we can recognise ourselves in the Father, only to realise how great his love for us must be.

And then there is the elder brother. He is also loved by the father who runs out to meet him as well as he has done for his brother. And who can only answer to the father's prodigal love for his second son with jealousy and bitterness. Two brothers, and a father caught in the middle. He loves them both, his great joy at the return of the one not taking away from the love he feels for the other. Suddenly meeting with resistance and resentment from his eldest, the one that has always been near, the one he probably thought would understand his happiness.

It is a very moving moment this, at the end of the story. It leaves the oldest son with a decision to make: Will he go in and share in the celebrations or will he stay outside and in his turn become the son that has taken his departure from the father? It leaves the father vulnerable: One child's return leaves him on the verge of losing the other one.

Could this be God? Forever waiting for one or the other son to return? For one or the other to share with him in the joy of life? Let down by one or the other, time and again, waiting with a restless heart and open arms, ready to love, to forgive, to take in, to give of what is his?

A God as vulnerable as a loving parent trying to raise a child, looking for intimacy, community, love and understanding from that child. Helpless and quite hopeless when the child distances itself,

wanders off, fails to understand, fails to connect on basic issues?

A God dependent for his joy to be complete on the relationships He has with people. Pining for them when they disconnect themselves from him, excessively happy when a relationship gets re-established?

A God waiting, watching, restless, running out, offering love, wanting closeness, intimacy, relationship?

With us?

Amen.