

ST. ANDREW'S, BLACKROCK & BRAY - 21ST FEBRUARY 2021

THE PARABLES OF JESUS; THE PRODIGAL SON (LUKE 15:11-32)

Welcome

"Hello and welcome to our 'Church at Home' service transcript for Sunday 21st February 2021. Sunday was a beautiful sunny spring morning, which I hope you were able to enjoy. It was also the first Sunday in Lent, and we have now begun our journey to Easter. I pray that this transcript will be uplifting to you today."

- Rev. Andrew Gill

Call to Worship – Psalm 25:1-10

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;

let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;

teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,

for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

Good and upright is the Lord;

therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,

and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,

for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Opening Prayer

God of all seasons,
in your pattern of all things
there is a time for keeping and a time for losing,
a time for building up and a time for pulling down.
In this holy season of Lent –
as we journey with our Lord to the cross–
help us to discern in our lives what we must take up;
what we must end and what we must begin.

Almighty God,
your Son Jesus Christ
fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we were but did not sin.
May he help us now when we are being tempted.

Come Holy Spirit and give us
the grace to lead a disciplined life,
the happy desire for obedience
and the joy which comes
from a closer walk with Christ. Amen.

Sermon - 'Parables of Jesus; the Prodigal Son'

Do you realise how much you are loved by God? We are continuing our series looking at the parables of Jesus and today's story is all about God's love, and we will see his wild compassion, and his excessive desire for his children to be with him. When Jesus first told this parable there would have been two groups of people in the audience, the tax collectors and sinners, and the pharisees and the teachers of the law. To both of these groups God's love was something that was distant. The tax collectors and the 'sinners', as they were called by everybody else, were outcasts, looked down on by the religious people. They thought God could never love them because his love was for perfect people. The pharisees and the teachers of the law were self-righteous, they had kept all the laws and

commandments, believed that didn't need God's grace or forgiveness. Love was a currency of which they had no need. But God loved both of those groups of people, God loves all of us. He sent his son Jesus into this world to seek and save the lost.

The story that we are going to look at today starts in Luke chapter 15 verses 1 to 2 which says, *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.'"* Jesus is criticised for loving the outsider and he replies with three parables. The first is about a farmer who searches for a lost sheep, the second one is about a woman who searches for a lost coin, and it's the third one that we are going to look at in more detail today. It's commonly called 'The Prodigal Son' but actually there are two sons in this story and both of them are equally lost. But the focus is on what their father does and how he responds to both of them. So it should really be called 'The parable of a loving father's response to his two lost sons,' but I suppose that's not quite as catchy!

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living." (Luke 15:11-13) What the younger son does here is absolutely deplorable. He goes to his father and says, 'I can't wait for you to die, give me my inheritance now.' Once he has his share of the estate he sells his part of the land which would have been in the family for generations, and he moves to a distant country. He wants nothing more to do with his father or the family. And in this distant land he recklessly spends all his money on self-indulgent living. He irresponsibly goes through all his money as if there is no tomorrow, but eventually consequences catch up with him.

Verse 14, *"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."* He has gone from being a father's son to a farmer's slave. He had everything, but now he

has nothing, even the pigs are living a better life than him. The younger son has hit rock bottom, and he finally comes to his senses and in verse 17 he says, *“How many of my father's hard servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him; Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hard servants.”*

He regrets all that he has done and he comes up with a plan to return home and to beg his father for mercy. He prepares a speech asking him to hire him as one of his servants, and so he gets up and begins the journey home. But what happens next is shocking! When you are familiar with this story, as many of us are, you can lose the drama of the twist that is coming. Because how the father responds is extraordinary. *“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”* (v.20)

I have a confession to make. I only discovered what the word ‘prodigal’ actually means this week! It means to be reckless or wasteful, it is an old-fashioned word that describes what this younger son did with his inheritance. But that word could also be used to describe the excessive love that the father has for his son. He sees his son while he was a long way off, meaning that he was looking out for him. His first response is to be filled with compassion, not anger or bitterness. He ran to him, and he embraced him as a son. Now, if you knew the father, you might want to say, ‘Wait, slow down. I know he is your son, but remember how he hurt you, all the terrible things that he has done to your family. Don't be so quick to fully accept him back.’ But in the father's mind, and in the father's heart, his son was dead and he has come back to life. So, in verses 22-24, he throws a party to celebrate that his son has returned home. This is a picture of God's love.

So often in these parables, the characters represent real people, and in this story the father represents God, and the younger son represents the sinners that Jesus came to save. This story illustrates God's great compassion and how he longs to receive his children back into his love even though they are undeserving. There are ways that we can be like the younger son too. We can run away from God and turn

our back on him. We try to live life our own way, only to see that it doesn't work out. Even as Christians we can turn to bad habits and stop spending time with God. Whether it is in the big ways, or the small, we can put distance between us and God. But see from this story how much God loves you! He desires to embrace you with his love, not with reluctance, but with rejoicing. Today if you return to God, or come to him for the first time, there will be a party in heaven celebrating that the lost has been found!

But that not the end of the story, what about the older son? *“Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come home,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has come back safe and sound. The elder brother became angry and refused to go in.”* (vv.25-28)

The older son is furious and he refuses to go in to the party, why? Why is he so angry? It is because even though he had not physically gone anywhere, relationally he was just as distant from the father. Even though he was a son, he lived his life as though he was a servant. He wanted to be rewarded for all the work that he had done, and to have a party thrown in his honour because he had earned it, so he finds this excessive kindness of the father almost offensive. In this story the older brother represents the Pharisees and the teachers of the law because they thought by following the law and obeying the commands they had earned God's blessing. They wanted to work their way up to God so that their righteousness would be the product of their own accomplishment. There are ways that we can be like the older son too. We can desire to be lauded as a servant because we deserve it, rather than being loved as a son by grace.

But God's love is for the older brother too. *“So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But*

we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” (vv.28b-32)

The father comes out and he pleads with his eldest son to come into the party and to join the celebration. But as the story ends we are unsure what decision he makes. It is deliberately left open so that people who heard would have to decide what they would do. What about us? What are we going to do? Will we stay outside in the cold, or will we join the celebration of God's love? God does not want you to be a servant to sin, and he does not want you to be a slave to your own self-righteousness either. Through the great love that he has demonstrated by the cross, his desire is to make you his child. So many of us are familiar with this story but have we experienced the love that it speaks of?

Today reading this perhaps you are like the younger son, and you have been living your life without God, doing all the wrong things. Know today that he is seeking for you. God is waiting for you to return to him – no matter who you are, no matter what you have done, no matter how many times you have failed – if you return to him today then he will embrace you with his compassion. Or possibly you are like the older son, you have done all the right things, yet you are still living your life without God, trusting in your own accomplishments. Know today that God is pleading with you to come in and experience his grace by joining the celebration of his love. Jesus came to give life to the dead, let his love find you today.

Prayer

Father God,

Thank you for loving me so much that you gave your one and only son, so that by believing in him I may not perish but have eternal life.

Lord, I am sorry for all the times in my life when I try to live apart from you. Forgive my foolish choices and my stubborn heart.

Father, I want to come home to you today.

Holy Spirit show me how much I am loved. Amen