



## the Prodigal Son – then and now

As most of you will know, this summer, we've taken a deliberate detour from the set lectionary readings, to travel in sync with our Sunday morning Gospel Conversations. With Lucy at the helm, we've been working our way through Luke's Gospel, paying particular attention to Luke's over-riding theme of social justice and concern for the outsider.

The particular theme of this week's Gospel conversation focussed on Luke's use of parables. Luke features not only the most number of parables from the three synoptic gospels, but also the highest number of unique parables (that is, those that don't appear anywhere else).

Parables are stories, works of fiction, Jesus tells as a teaching tool, featuring people and situations that were accessible to his audience, to help convey a deeper truth. As we see in the Gospels, not everyone understands them straightaway. Jesus deliberately teaches in parables, often sharing explanations only with his disciples, and not with his wider audience. Although, with the benefit of hindsight, we must consider the meaning of some parables to be obvious, often, on closer inspection, they work on many different levels. Although they are allegorical rather than historical, it's still important to understand the cultural context in which they are told.

That's certainly the case with the parable we've just heard, which is the best known and the longest of all and is exclusive to Luke. The first vital factor or thing to understand is the shock nature of the younger son's request – in demanding his inheritance he is in effect wishing his father dead and bringing disgrace upon the family. New Testament scholar and Middle Eastern expert Kenneth Bailey writes: "... the startling fact is that, to my knowledge, in all of Middle Eastern literature (aside from this parable) from ancient times to the present, there is no case of any son, older or younger, asking for his inheritance from a father who is still in good

health."<sup>1</sup> Equally striking is the father's silent acquiescence and it's been argued that the older brother also shows great disrespect to the father by not objecting to his brother's outrageous demand.

This story is known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son but it's often been suggested that it's really the parable of the loving father, or of the righteously indignant older brother, or even the two lost sons. The younger son makes himself an outsider; he severs the ties of culture, village and family, through his words and actions whereas the older son is lost through his rejection of the role his culture, village and family requires of him - that of mediator between his father and brother.

When he hits hard times, the prodigal's return is based more on pragmatism than genuine remorse. What he perhaps fails to recognise is the full impact of his actions on his family – that he has not only brought disgrace upon them but also – to a large degree – alienated them from the village and local community. Barbara Brown Taylor explains his transgression: "What he does is so reprehensible that the Talmud describes a ceremony to deal with it – a *qetsatsah* ceremony, to punish a Jewish boy who loses the family inheritance to Gentiles. Here's how it works. If he ever shows up in his village again, then the villagers fill a large earthenware jar with burned nuts and corn, break it in front of the prodigal, and shout his name aloud, pronouncing him cut off from his people."<sup>2</sup>

Understood in this context, the father's reaction to the prodigal's return is all the more remarkable. A nobleman such as the father with flowing robes never runs anywhere, and yet we are told this man breaks into a sprint as soon as

---

<sup>1</sup> Bailey, Kenneth, quoted in Christopher D Marshall, *Compassionate Justice, Eugene*, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012) p 198

<sup>2</sup>

<http://www.barbarabrowntaylor.com/newsletter374062.htm>

he catches a glimpse of his younger son. The father is only too well aware of the gauntlet his son must run on returning to the village, and so rushes to welcome his son as he enters the village. Thus the father takes upon himself the shame due his son, and ensures that the son re-enters the village under the father's protection. He orders the servants to dress the prodigal in the finest (most likely the father's) robe, and to put a ring on his finger (a sign of both acceptance and trust) and shoes on his feet to further emphasise the status of the son, thus ensuring he will be treated with respect by servants and villagers. The declaration of the celebratory banquet pushes the point home – the fatted calf is slain only for very special guests, and then only for a party to which the whole village will be invited. This is a major celebration. Richard Rohrbaugh also picks up the politics of this gesture, astutely recognising that: "The calf is for the villagers, not the prodigal. It is a peace offering aimed at the community."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the father is being proactive, in throwing a lavish party before the villagers can stage a qetsatsah.

At the end of the story, it is the older son, who literally cannot stomach the welcome offered to his wastrel brother, who is the outsider, left outside the party brimming with understandable indignation. This parable has much to tell us about human pride and folly but it also has much to say about justice, judgment and unconditional love. Many consider it good news for all those of us who have ever acted unfairly, who have hurt others and ourselves in the process, and for anyone who has ever felt excluded.

But it's also a deeply uncomfortable and unsettling story that is painfully honest about the fallibility and shortcomings of humankind. Much is left untold. Will there be real reconciliation? Will the prodigal show any real remorse or will he take his father's extraordinary welcome for granted and so always remain an outsider? Will the older son continue to exclude himself? How will the community behave towards the family? Even without the qetsatsah, will there still be a sense of alienation and casting out?

When I revisited the story for this sermon I was immediately reminded of an open letter which

---

<sup>3</sup> Rohrbaugh, Richard L. 'A Dysfunctional family and Its neighbours', in V. George Shillington, *Jesus and his Parables* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1997), p 161

featured in the news earlier this month, by American father Pearce Tefft, which was published in his local paper, not so much to as about his youngest son, Peter. This is what he wrote: "On Friday night, my son traveled to Charlottesville, Virginia, and was interviewed by a national news outlet while marching with reported white nationalists, who allegedly went on to kill a person.

"I, along with all of his siblings and his entire family, wish to loudly repudiate my son's vile, hateful and racist rhetoric and actions. We do not know specifically where he learned these beliefs. He did not learn them at home.

"I have shared my home and hearth with friends and acquaintances of every race, gender and creed. I have taught all of my children that all men and women are created equal. That we must love each other all the same.

"Evidently Peter has chosen to unlearn these lessons, much to my and his family's heartbreak and distress. We have been silent up until now, but now we see that this was a mistake. It was the silence of good people that allowed the Nazis to flourish the first time around, and it is the silence of good people that is allowing them to flourish now."

Pearce Tefft then went on to say he and the family had decided to disown his youngest son, that he is no longer welcome at family gatherings until he renounces his beliefs.

He wrote: "Peter, my son, is not welcome at our family gatherings any longer. I pray my prodigal son will renounce his hateful beliefs and return home. Then and only then will I lay out the feast."<sup>4</sup>

This real story, which is ongoing, is equally uncomfortable and unsettling. Other members of the family have also spoken out, denouncing and disowning the young man in question. It reminds us that we live in a climate where hatred and prejudice are not exclusive to any particular culture or faith, and that those who seek to

---

4

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/15/please-son-renounce-hate-father-disowns-charlottesville-protest/>

persecute and exclude others exclude themselves from their own families and communities.

What reactions or sentiments does this story evoke in you? No doubt most of us would recoil if invited to engage with the experience or point of view of this modern day prodigal son, but how do you react to the father's actions? And the other family members who stand by the father? Perhaps you have had to exercise tough love to bring a loved one to their senses, as can be quite common in cases of addiction. Maybe even now you're trying to connect with someone you love whose behaviour is causing you and others pain, concern or distress. Or perhaps you're beating yourself up because you've had to sever ties with someone to protect yourself or others.

If that's the situation you find yourself in today, then take heart, and hold fast to these two stories, stories of heartbroken parents who don't want to give up on their children; stories of two fathers who, in the face of considerable hurt, adversity and disappointment, hold fast to the hope that the seeds they have sown in love may yet one day - however far off - be harvested in the return of their wayward sons. Amen.

Lindsay Meader