

## St Mary Abbots, Matins

Lent 4

Joshua 5:9-12, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-end

Father Christopher

What do you call the parable we heard earlier? Probably the parable of the Prodigal Son. Though I think I prefer the name the Germans give it: 'the Lost Son', putting it in the context of the two parables that came before, that of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, emphasising God's seeking each of us out.

Some also call it the parable of the Two Sons. The resentment of the elder son is sometimes thought to be a later addition to the story, but the contrast between their father's overwhelming love for his brother, and his own response to the celebration of his return, seems to me to be critical to the story. I wonder too about the relationship between the brothers themselves, and indeed about the relationship between all three.

We might therefore call this the parable of the Single Father and His Two Sons, for there is no mention of any mother, rather ironically for this Mothering Sunday.

We might wonder what is going on for the brothers, that they both rebel against their father as they do: the younger asking for his share of their inheritance. And think about that for a minute: that means the father selling half of what he owns to give to this son. People often comment on how this implies that he essentially anticipates his father's death, and even wishes it in a way; but aside from that, it certainly implies that he will not be coming back. What has gone so wrong for him to wish to escape in this way?

And the elder son complains to their father when the return of the younger is celebrated, '*Lo, many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.*'

Somewhere along the way resentment has crept in. The relationship of this son with the father seemed stronger; it was certainly more regular. But he has long ago forgotten his father's love for him, and feels as though he has never had anything in return for his steady, dutiful service.

There is of course the bigger point to be made about their respective responses to the love of the father at the end of the story; but I think part of the resonance of this story is the way in which these two young men have found themselves caught up in petty bitterness and ill-feeling in the first place. These are not minor details, but a central part of most people's experience of life.

The larger hurts we might find easier to face in some ways, because it is more obvious that they need tackling. I read a Basil Hume sermon the other evening, in which he said, with the wisdom which only a monk could: "Just as I tend to believe that most people are sick rather than sinful, so too I think that the most corrosive factor in any community or family are the wounds which we unwittingly inflict on each other." And he listed a number of inner hurts, which he described as enslaving and saddening, leading to our being turned in on ourselves: '*thwarted ambition, resentment, frustration, ... the pain that comes from feeling unappreciated, disliked, rejected; criticism, too, which is unfair.*'

How true this is. And how corrosive such feelings are to our self-worth and confidence, as well to community life, whether that is within a couple, a wider family, a workplace, a monastery or even a church. And at the base of such feelings of disappointment, sadness and low-level anger or resentment, is insecurity.

It occurred to me that one could see the whole of the Gospel as really being about insecurity: a failure to see how loved we are, and God's response to that. As I was saying in a confirmation class in the week, in all of Jesus's healing miracles, I am most struck by the sense of full attention and love He gives to each person whom He heals. And in showing His love, God's love, for those people, Jesus is lifting the insecurity which they feel through their exclusion – the harm they have experienced as a result of being separated from others, just as much as He is healing their physical infirmities.

He is, in other words, showing them the truth about themselves, demonstrating the falsity of their own, and our own, insecurity – that niggling feeling that we are not good enough, that we do not deserve to be loved for who we are.

You may think that feelings about our worth, whether our own or others' feelings about us, are subjective, and so there is no 'truth' to be revealed – some people just don't seem as loveable, or as special, as others. But this is where our parable, and the whole of Jesus's teaching, shows us that there is an objective truth to be revealed here.

Both the sons in our story have developed their own feelings of lack of self-worth, of insecurity. The younger son somehow feeling the need to go away to prove himself, or to live as himself somehow; and the elder later feeling under-appreciated at home.

Notice the all too human exaggeration by the elder son of his younger brother's sins, as he seeks to widen the gap between them, complaining that the younger son has lived with harlots, not something we have been told he actually did.

The corrosion of relationship, as such feelings have festered, no doubt over the years, is palpable, in this short story. To develop such a sense of character in so few lines makes it the work of genius it has always been celebrated as. And it is because of the subtle corrosion over time, in my view, that this family is in such need of healing.

We do not know what the response of the elder brother is to the father's rebuke, *'It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.'* But from their own inward-looking feelings of resentment, both have received the truth from the father. The elder is told *'thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.'* And the father showed his love for him by going out from the celebrations to him: he is not forgotten.

Just as the father went out in such dramatic style to the younger son on his return home. When the younger *'came to himself'*, as we are told so tellingly, he returns not as a son, for he has had and spent his half of his father's property, but ready to work as a hired hand.

In a throwing off of the dignity of a patriarch of the time, the father does not wait at home for his son's pitiful return, ready to teach him a lesson; or at least not the kind of lesson we might expect. Instead, *'when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion [literally, a churning of his guts], and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him'*.

The father is of course our heavenly Father. And in this response to the younger son, we do not just see great, overwhelming love and forgiveness, but we see healing. And we see the healing of those wounds which had festered over time, and which had paralysed or choked the younger son's love for his father. We do not know whether the elder son's hardened heart was also healed, but we do see in the younger's actions how little is required from us to receive healing.

He does not run - he skulks home, not even as a son. And he falteringly utters the words he has prepared and rehearsed to himself, so as to get his place as a hired hand.

The father does not care about such words, or even wait for his apology– he has been waiting for his son and he greets him as such.

We all have our irritations, resentments, scleroses of the heart. They may seem immovably fixed, as our characters, habits and relationships have grown over the years. These are all however born of our own insecurities, which go with a fear of not being loved.

And in this parable Jesus shows us the truth. He shows us the magnitude of the compassion of God, always waiting to disabuse us of our fears.

Another thing Basil Hume said is that the difference between our love and God's love is that we love because other people are there, whereas we are here because God loved each of us into being. And in the light of His overwhelming love we see our true selves. *'For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'* Amen