

Sermon for 6th March, 2016.

The parable of the prodigal son is a favourite for many. It touches many souls very deeply.

And I believe the main reason for this is that this parable, more than any other story in the gospel, expresses the boundlessness of God's compassionate love.

The parable tells us explicitly that God's love is about unconditional acceptance.

When we look at the whole of the gospel of Luke we find that the central message is about love- God's love in Christ.

Today's gospel reading comes from chapter 15 and in this chapter

there are 3 parables – one after the other that portray how God's love breaks through all human perceptions of love and mercy that make love conditional.

In chapter 15 we hear the extravagance of God's love in the story of the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to save one, we hear about it in the story of a woman who turns her house upside down to recover a lost penny, and in today's gospel we hear about a Jewish father who joyfully welcomes home his wayward son who had denounced his spiritual inheritance and become a gentile.

Now in the Parable of the Prodigal Son I believe that many of us identify on some level with one or even both of the sons– the one who goes his own way and gets himself into deep trouble, but comes to himself and returns home to the love of the father, perhaps could bring to mind our own misadventures in life and the loving forgiveness that is offered to us - or the dutiful son who holds fast to his sense of justice and self-righteousness, perhaps can bring to mind our own judgemental ways that have kept love outside of ourselves at a distance, but the focus of the parable is really about the very personal love of God through Christ in the world.

The theme of joy floods the whole chapter in Luke's gospel and universality, community and salvation intermingle and form one major message and that is, that the call to participate in God's love and joy comes through Jesus Christ - because through Christ the lost are found – the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, the lost brother.

God's love in Christ is not about the soft sentimental kind of love but rather the strong, transforming kind.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is really a story about the character of the father, and the extravagance of his love.

I have brought along today a print of a 17 Century painting by Rembrandt called *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and I believe it captures the loving and the lost very descriptively.

Rembrandt of course was the master of light and shadow as we know, and we see this clearly here.

Here is the father, Rembrandt paints him in warm colours, beautiful hands, and one is a masculine hand and the other a feminine hand depicting something of the fullness of God.

We see here the serene kind understanding accepting face, embracing the son who was once lost, but who has come to himself, and returned home.

Standing as large as life beside them is the other son.

We know it is the other son because he is wearing the same clock as the father and as large as he is, in the light we can see that he does not enter into the love that abounds within touching distance before him – his upright posture, his clamped hands depict his withdrawal.

The look on his face speaks about judgement and unacceptance. And it keeps him isolated.

We can hear his thoughts addressed to the father: “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command;

Yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him.

This son had thought that he could earn the fathers love, but inbuilt in this sense of earning is his own sense of justice, injustice and ultimately, self-righteous judgement.

The parable however, highlights beautifully that the love of God is not something that can be earned because God’s love reflects the way of God, not the way of human behaviour.

We only have to look at the cross of Christ to see this. In the first Easter event we see the love of god overcome the way of human behaviour.

Humanity did not earn the victory over death that is revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cannot earn this type of love.

Love is not an emotion for God that goes up and down and is determined by human behaviour – it is who God is. **It is there where God is.**

The Parable of the Prodigal Son offers many levels of understanding and a very important one that I would like to highlight here is that we too can be like the father who looks at us in whatever state we are - **in love**.

We too can look at ourselves in love and we can accept and receive all of ourselves, even those parts of ourselves that we have viewed and judged with clasped hands and resentful eyes—we can look at them within us with the strong transforming kind of love because such vision made possible through Christ is necessary for our own journey home to wholeness.

When we do this we will be kinder and more accepting not only of ourselves, but of others, and better placed to love God and our neighbour as ourselves.

In the epistle this morning Paul writes about this in his letter to the Corinthians. This is what is meant by reconciliation in Christ. The new way of relating to God, ourselves and each other.

This is what it means to be that new creation in Christ.

I believe the reason that many of us are deeply touched by the parable of the Prodigal Son is that somewhere deep within us, in that part that is the image of God untouched by life's wayward journey and feelings of anger and resentment, we recognise the all-embracing unconditional love of the father.

And the recognition and craving for it, is not only for ourselves but for us to share with others. I believe that in our true humanity we want to be just like the father.

Because as the parables tell us in this chapter of Luke's gospel:

Happiness and joy is the result and it comes from a willingness to share in God's own joy in dispensing salvation.

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