

The parable in our gospel this morning, is the last in a set of three.

The first two (in previous verses,) are about a lost sheep and a lost coin.

All three parables relate how God's mercy knows no boundaries and how it breaks through all human restrictions of how God should act toward sinners.

God's mercy, is featured in a way that is beyond anything we can imagine.

It is as lavish and extraordinary as a shepherd who abandons 99 sheep to save one, and as a woman who turns her house upside down to recover a paltry sum, and as a Jewish father who joyfully welcomes home his wayward son who has lived as a gentile.

All three parables, writes theologian Alexander Shaia are told by Jesus and their "seeking nuances" challenged the mindset of the Pharisees that promoted a way of "holding on" to the old ways and beliefs- rather than letting go and moving ahead. ¹

They also teach the disciples of every age about the abounding mercy of God.

The focus today in the gospel story, is the parable of the prodigal son.

It is a favourite of many, including myself. It is in fact one of the most loved parables and perhaps this is so because the characters and their predicaments seem to reach into the deep, hidden places of our own life experience and anoint us with everlasting hope in the great mercy of God.

The parable portrays different emotional experiences – those of the father, the elder son and the younger son. Some are welcoming and loving that make the heart sing.

Like when the father saw the son coming home after his wayward jaunt - and how he ran out to meet him. The father wasn't bothered about protocol or tradition-for it was considered undignified for an older gentlemen to run – instead he let his natural response express his heart – he runs out to meet his returning son.

And then there is the crucial turning point in the younger sons story when he "came to himself," before he returned home.

These very simple words indicate that there were stirrings within that agitated him to face and accept his reality, and the hurt that had been done. The healing pain of his repentance resulted in his return to the embrace of his father.

Sometimes we have to reach the lowest point before we surrender to our dependence upon God in our lives. And it can happen more than once on our life's journey.

Now there are some troubling parts in the parable as well. The older brother resented the fuss and the welcoming celebrations that the father lavished on his brother. The father however refused to accept the older son's attitude: saying that he was "always with him," and he reiterated the need to celebrate what was once dead and had come to life.

Sadly the older brother's self-righteousness - his own sense of justice won the day. He held on to his resentment and disowned his own relationship as a son and a brother.

Theologian Jane Williams makes the point that both the brothers are in need of forgiveness, love and mercy – *The older brother, wants love and recognition, like the younger one but he*

¹ Alexander Shaia, *The Hidden Power of the Gospels*, Harper One, New York: 2010, p288.

wants to believe that he has earned it himself, rather than receiving it as a gift.² The younger brother accepts what the father offers and finds himself in the father's arms, wearing a special robe and smelling the feast being prepared for his homecoming.

This way of acceptance I believe, pertains to what Paul writes about in Romans and describes as the circumcision of the heart. Circumcision of the heart in the spirit means a state of union with God that speaks of humility, and a right judgment of oneself.

It is not the old outward sign of God's compassion and mercy, like we hear this morning in the reading from Joshua. It is rather part of being a new creation in Christ as Paul writes in today's Epistle: "*so if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation everything old has passed away. See everything has become new.*"

All this challenges us in this modern age of self-sufficiency – for we may hold on to our old ways and our own sense of justice which might very well fit with the older brother's way, yet what we can learn from the parable is that the most valuable asset is not what is earned or worked for but the relationship of father and son regained.

The embittered son who holds on to his resentment denied himself all the possibilities of the two sons sharing the relationship with each other and with the father –in which all three had the opportunity to blossom and bring forth much fruit, wholeness and joy.

In Christ we are called to focus on what is genuinely important – matters of the heart – the end result of which is God's great mercy which can lead us to an inner awakening.

And it is comforting and reassuring to believe that in Christ we have a constant companion that we can trust and depend on in every predicament we find ourselves in.

Jane Williams shares her insight about this and writes: *The infinite patience of God, is more active than that of the father of the prodigal, because God does more than wait; in Jesus Christ, God enters into the way of the prodigal so that even here, while the prodigal is still assuming that he is fine on his own, the love of the father is present.*

*The story of Jesus is significantly different from the parable of the prodigal son, because Jesus is God come to find us, not just waiting for us at the end, but present at every turn of the road. Jesus tells this story, but the story he lives is a different one. The life of Jesus is the life of the God who leaves home to be with all of us prodigals, in good times and in bad, and even into death. The life of Jesus means that we can turn and find God beside us everywhere.*³

This then is our challenge- to prayerfully live in the acceptance of this very personal love and mercy and depend upon it. Lent is the perfect time to once again "come to ourselves," in the silence with God. The perfect time to "let go" of restrictive habits and slowly learn his ways in us while depending upon his loving and abundant mercy.

The Lord be with you.

² Jane Williams. *The Merciful Humility of God*, Bloomsbury Continuum, London: 2018, p5.

³ Ibid p4.