

Prodigal Son Luke 15.

Our gospel reading today has given us one of the most, if not the most, famous of Jesus' teachings. The Prodigal, or Lost, Son. It is a gem of course. As one reads and rereads it all sorts of parallels and fresh insights emerge.

But I don't want to try to seek yet more fresh light and innovative readings. I want to let the parable speak to us, followers of its author, today.

But we must try to read it properly, both in its immediate textual setting, and then its context of ancient world custom and practice.

- Note to begin v1,2 Yet again Jesus is being monitored, and criticised for welcoming the wrong sort of people. Jesus is speaking to top religious leaders.
 - The PS is third in a line of parables with similar structure. Lost – found – party – celebration of repentance. Sheep, coins, finally, and very pointedly, people.
 - Notice the Rs in all 3. Lost, then recovered, rescued, reconciled, restored, emphasis upon **repentance**. Throughout a clear '**entry to the kingdom**' message.
1. Father is a reasonably well heeled landowner with 2 sons. Younger son wants his 'inheritance' in advance of his father's demise. Although outrageous this is not completely without precedent. Disrespectful, unpleasant, but not unknown. (*Tobit 8.21 but frowned upon Sirach 33 20-24*). Probably a 2 to 1 split would be envisaged (Duet 21 17).
 2. The deed is done. **It is split between them v12**. Older son clearly holds his in the usual way. Now all will come his way on his father's death.
 3. The younger son somehow turns his into cash and off he goes.

At this point recall **this is a parable** – earthly story with heavenly meaning. As we unpack the story, we uncover the meaning, then we are able to apply it.

4. Son 2 has lots of fun for a while squandering the cash. (recall GB's misquote of this 'I spent half my wealth on wine, women and fast cars; I squandered the rest'). But our man doesn't have limitless resources, nor does he have an income, only capital and it's gone. He's now broke.
5. The casual work he gets has issues. It involves pigs and note the subtext here – Jesus is speaking to top synagogue people. It also seems to involve an eagle eyed employer on the look out for theft in the workplace. The guy cannot even eat pigswill.
6. His position is desperate. There are no 'benefits'. This is a time before tax credit, job seekers allowance. Quite the contrary. Indeed even almsgiving was discouraged in the Graeco-Roman world. Playwright Plautus (forerunner of the 'knock, knock' genre of humour) 'He does the beggar a bad service who gives him meat and drink, for what he gives is lost, and the life of the poor is prolonged to their own misery'. Nice little attitude. Desperate indeed. The prospect was begging, probably not very successfully, or thieving. Either way life would be unpleasant and brief.

7. So our man **'comes to his senses'** v 17. He makes plans to go to his father and, in effect, try to renegotiate his position and maybe become an employee in his father's business. He hopes his father will take pity and give him a job. He knows any notion of 'sonship' is now lost.

The emphasis now switches to the father and his reaction is truly astonishing. Let's follow what happens, again in its ancient world context.

8. Father sees him in the distance, goes running to him and gives an astonishingly warm welcome. Landowners in the ancient world simply didn't run like that. It is a massive loss of dignity. A bit like imagining Ted Heath running up to greet Mrs Thatcher and congratulate her on becoming PM.
9. Son makes a very difficult statement of repentance and the welcome goes on and on. There's a party, celebration. An animal is slaughtered, wine is uncorked, there's a live band and a barn dance. One must see however the backcloth to this outpouring of joy. As in parables one and two there will be friends, neighbours, relatives. Killing an animal would feed dozens and dozens. But this is an ancient world **honour-shame society**. In making his personal joy so public the father is bringing great embarrassment, shame upon himself for the sake of this lost, now rescued son. The restoration takes place at great personal and social cost.

We start to see the deeper meaning here. God's vision is for a kingdom where all are welcomed. In his total love he has come up with a way, yes a **shameful way**, of restoring a lost humanity. The offer is there for any who can **'come to their senses'** to be rescued, reconciled, restored.

Shamefully the mechanism is the cross – **'bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood'**.

Have we to get that point?

- 'Come to our senses' and recognised our plight. Have we come to God sorry and repenting. 'Come near to God and he will come near to you' said James (That's James the Just). Indeed **he comes running**, such is his love.

But the parable has a final little twist.

10. Older brother now appears, and he ain't 'appy. He has suffered no personal financial loss but he seems obsessed with the shame and injustice of it all. There is no 'brotherly love' to parallel the father's parental love. He would have preferred that father had turned number 2 away. 'Don't come near this family – you have only brought shame upon us – get lost'. He gives his father a sickening little speech about his faithful, filial obedience which has gone completely unrecognised. 'Don't you know how lucky you are to have a perfect son like me, yet you've done nothing to show it'. He's not about to join in any celebration. Stripping the willow or a bit of karaoke are not on his agenda.
11. Jesus is clearly here looking at his Pharisee audience. Their joyless adherence to tradition is in the frame in the form of the older brother's attitude. But the parable ends. Does the father's gentle and very loving work with his older son bear fruit? He is every bit as lost as the second son who is now restored. Tantalisingly we do not know. But we can look for parallels to ourselves today.

In conclusion:

- Is there anything of the older brother in us? Completely confident in our own virtue, with no need to reproach ourselves at all. Brought up in the church. Always been part of the set up, always followed the traditions, no need for anything else. There is a saying 'God has no grandchildren'. Children but no grandchildren. The choice is ours and ours alone. We must all recognise our personal need, our personal wretchedness and come genuinely remorseful not simply trotting out well known and traditional liturgical phrases. We are all of us 'younger brothers'.
- Alpha coming up is an opportunity (a) to pray for the rescue of the 'lost of our community', (b) to be ready to party and celebrate as folk 'come to their senses' and come to repentance, to forgiveness, to faith. If we are not looking forward to this party in the autumn, it may mean there is still rather too much of the older brother in us.