

What a story!
Luke 15:11-32

If I had a desert-island discs kind of situation, and had to choose which passages from the Bible I would take with me, I am certain that I would want to include the story we have heard today as our gospel reading. It must be the best loved of all the parables Jesus told. It has been described as one of the best short stories ever told, and has inspired artists of every kind - Rembrandt drew it, Debussy wrote music about it, Massfield wrote a poem based on it, and there has also been a Ballet version. I would go along with Robert Bridges, who called it "a perfectly flawless piece of work".

But the question we have to ask about a parable is not whether it is a good one, but why Jesus told it. And what Luke seems to want us to understand is that he told it in the context of being under attack for the way he lived his life in company with what Luke calls "Tax-collectors and sinners". Just before this story we have an account of how he is criticised for welcoming sinners and eating with them. In response, he tells the story of the lost sheep, and the lost coin, and how there is rejoicing over the lost being found. Then follows this story to cap it all.

In that context, we can see that the most important person in the story is not the younger son who runs away, but the elder one who stays at home. This is what is different from the other two stories about the lost being found. When the shepherd finds the sheep, he calls people together to rejoice, and as far as we know, they do so. In the story of the lost coin, the woman's friends come and share her joy. But in this story, there is a dissenting voice, a moaner, a complainer, a party-pooper - the elder brother. There can be little doubt who it was that Jesus saw in this role - it was the people who were so anxious to criticise him - the Pharisees and Scribes.

Now let's be fair to these folk: they were religious, devout and earnest about their religion. But they couldn't cope with a view of God which went beyond being utterly just. There were laws to be kept, and you either kept them or you didn't. So you were good or bad, you were acceptable or not. They had little room for shades of grey. But, says Jesus, they are behaving like this elder brother. They have done nothing wrong - note he agrees that is the case. Their problem is that they want God to be as limited in his love as the older son wanted his father to be. And religion throughout history is littered with examples of people imposing on God their very human limitations. It comes from a very human pride and superiority which is truly amazing. It ends up with the kind of statement made at an ecumenical discussion - "Fine - you worship God your way, and I will worship him in his." Sadly, we all can feel that not far beneath the surface, there is an element of the older brother in us. And woe betide the person who begins to point out our limitations to us. Maybe you know Sydney Carter's song from sixty years ago which had the chorus "So we're writing to the Bishop to say that we are shocked - the Vicar is a beatnik, he ought to be unfrocked." That is an almost perfect modern parallel to Jesus' story this morning. Except that the things they object to are nothing like as serious as the things Jesus did. "At early morning service, he plays the mandolin - we've never actually been there, but we know that it's a sin - so we're writing to the Bishop..." Jesus did far more than play a mandolin. By the way *he* treated people, by implication he criticised the way *they* treated people. They couldn't cope with that. He was smudging their nice clear lines. His religion was disturbing to them, because you couldn't

quite be sure where where you are. It is the same issue as in the story of the workers hired at various times during the day to pick the grapes, and all getting the same wage at the end. God's love seems to contradict what they understand by justice.

Our rules and regulations may not be as grotesque as some of the ones they had. But they produce the same effects, sometimes. I can recall vividly uproar in an old folks home I used to visit years ago. Several very devout old ladies used to come when I went in with Holy Communion once a month. But they were outraged when I was willing to give communion to someone they *knew* hadn't been confirmed. Or I think of a man I was very fond of in the parish where I served my curacy. He had an addiction problem which none of us knew about, until it came to light that he had embezzled all his wife's firm's holiday fund to finance his gambling habit. He went to prison, and out of that experience in the far country, to quote this parable, he came to his senses, and came back to that church - by this time I had left - apparently a changed man. But I gather there were those who would not stay in the church with him - "either he goes or we do" was the message flying around. It was a tribute to that community's faith that they stuck by him, and as it were killed the fatted calf. So older brothers are around today.

That is why Jesus told the story. That older brother is crucial to understanding it. But what do we actually remember most? Maybe it is different things for different people. But if I had to draw a picture of this story, like children in school are sometimes asked to after hearing a story read, it would not be of the younger son with the pigs, or the older one sulking - it would probably be the Father rushing out to meet the returning boy. The dominating picture is of the Father, this man who loves and loves and loves, and who clearly was representing God in the story as Jesus tells it. God is like this man. And no doubt we can all think of parents who have gone on loving and loving when children have abused their love appallingly. Again I can think of an old lady who told me lovingly of her son, and how successful he had been, and how kind he was to her. It was only after a while I realised that he never came to see her, or wrote, or showed any sort of affection in any way. But she would not have a bad word said about him. Her love could not be broken. Such people do reflect the love of God. But it isn't always so. One man who had offended his father was advised to think of this story - "just go home, he'll kill the fatted calf" he was advised. A few days later he was asked "Did he kill the fatted calf?" "No," said the man ruefully, "but he nearly killed the Prodigal Son". The father in this story is the one Jesus is wanting those older brothers who were criticising him to know about. And in the way Jesus behaves with the people the older brothers reject, he is being a mirror of that Father and his love.

So let's look for a moment at what the Father in the story does. First of all, he is generous - he divides all he has between his children. He takes risks, in doing that. He knows that control has gone from him. His children can make a mess of things in whatever way they choose. And when the younger son goes off, he doesn't put him out of sight and out of mind. Clearly his eye is on the road, waiting for his return. And no sooner does he appear on the horizon, that this father is out on his way, ready to welcome him home. He doesn't allow him time to make all his carefully prepared speech of saying sorry. He is only half-way through when he interrupts with the commands to get him the best robe, and a ring and shoes and to prepare a feast. What an amazing picture that is of God's love. Yes, he gives us freedom to make a mess of everything - and he has given us all he has between us. So we could go through the entire tale, and find echoes of what God does with us as individuals, with his people as a whole as a community. And to the extent that we have encountered that free, giving, risking, forgiving, welcoming and rejoicing love of God, we will know that this tale is a good one because it rings true.

Let me end by asking what we should call this story. Traditionally it has been known as the parable of the Prodigal Son. But many scholars have challenged this - and after all, there is no title in the Bible itself, so it has no more authority than long tradition. Because actually it is no more about this son who went off than about the brother who stayed at home. So one Bible heads it "The Brother's Quarrel". But still more it is about the Father, who stayed and loved and waited. Some modern Bibles have headed it "The Loving Father" - but best of all in my book is the title a German Professor of Theology called Helmut Thielicke gave it. he called it "The Waiting Father". And that is what God is like. He is waiting for all of us to come home to him. And when we do, he is waiting to get the feast ready, and to rejoice. The younger boy had to go away to realise what he had at home. The older boy didn't yet seem to have grasped what love surrounded him. The Father waits for both to know what T.S.Eliot wrote about in "Little Gidding:

The end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started,
And to know the place for the first time.