

## 21<sup>st</sup> June 2020: Luke 15:11-32 – The Prodigal Son ‘Our Journey Home’

A young man walks into his father’s study one day and says: ‘Dad, I wish you were *dead*.’

That would be a striking first scene in a TV drama, wouldn’t it? We’d immediately start thinking: Who’s the family? Why does the son want his father dead? How will the father respond?

Well, that is how the iconic story of the Prodigal Son begins. The way we read the text in the bible doesn’t give the full force of what’s going on here. In the culture of the time, inheritances were only ever settled after death, so when the younger son finds his dad and says: ‘Give me my share of the estate,’ what he’s effectively saying is: ‘Dad, I wish you were dead.’

Take a moment to think about that. Perhaps especially if you’ve been a parent yourself, and invested years of your life raising your children, you’ve given heart and soul to nurture them and help them to grow, and then one day... this. This is a not a heat-of-the-moment thing, spoken in the course of an argument, but a considered request. Imagine the anguish it must have caused the father. And yet: the father agrees and the young man leaves.

Most of us know how the story unfolds: the young man squanders it all, ends up destitute, realises what a mess he’s made of things and returns home. It is a beautiful story of redemption, of second chances, of restoration. But in fact, the son is not really the focus of the story. **The story is really all about the father.**

In Luke 15, Jesus tells us three stories: the lost sheep, lost coin and lost (or prodigal) son. In the first two, the focus is not what was lost but the person who finds them. The loving shepherd who finds the sheep, the patient woman who finds her lost coin. So although the son is a compelling character, a human story many of us can relate to, it follows that the true central character of the story is the father. In fact the parable would be better titled ‘the Waiting Father’ or ‘the Forgiving Father’ or even ‘the Lovesick Father’.

As you probably realise, the father figure here is an image of God, and this parable is probably Jesus’ most profound teaching of all on the true character of God. A loving, endlessly patient and forgiving parent. Look at how he deals with the pain of losing his son. He doesn’t hide away, but waits every day for his son to come home. How else would he see him when the son was still a long way off? He must have been *looking!* And when he does see him, he humiliates himself by running – old men in that culture never ran – to see him, and by restoring to him all the signs of true sonship: the ring, the robe, the sandals. The son’s forgiveness and restoration is instant and complete. He doesn’t have to work for it, to pay penance, to accept a lesser role.

**And Jesus says to us through this beautiful story: this is what God is really like.** Not the scary tyrant we often think he is. Not the hard taskmaster who is always demanding his pound of flesh, making us earn his acceptance. But *a parent who is just helplessly in love with his children*, who won’t force his will on them but can’t wait to welcome them home. If that’s not how you’ve ever thought of God before, take a moment to let that sink in....

Today is Father's Day and mention of our own human fathers will no doubt prompt a range of responses among us. Some of us will have had great fathers, ones who modelled the kind of strong but sacrificial love we see here in this story. Others will have had terrible fathers, perhaps even abusive ones, and can't hear the word father without a stab of pain in their heart. Most of us, I imagine, will be somewhere in between. We had *normal* dads, with strengths and flaws. We can celebrate the good bits and acknowledge the less good bits.

And often the image of our human father dominates our perspective of what it means to call God Father. Jesus insists that this is a name we can – in fact *should* – use for God, he puts it at the heart of the prayer he gives us, and it's meant to convey the true intimacy that all of us can enjoy with God. But I recognise that many people find that hard, and our journey to understanding the true fatherhood of God is a challenging one.

Yet, I think it's also true that in the conversations I've had with many people about this, even when human fathers fall well short of the divine ideal, most people carry an image of what an ideal father *should* be like, one which is remarkably close to what we see here in this story.

Even as we remember fathers today – either with joy or sadness, or perhaps a bit of both – we want to acknowledge that part of **the journey of our spiritual life is learning to be the child of a divine father**, one with endless love and patience, who waits expectantly at the edge of his land for his wayward children to come home.

The journey of our life is ultimately about coming home. And let's remember there are two lost sons in this story. There's the obvious lostness of the younger son, pursuing his self-destructive empty lifestyle. But there's also the lostness of the elder son: outwardly faithful, but increasingly resentful and bitter, secretly nursing a grievance that the other son was always his dad's favourite. The Father in the story has to go *outside* to meet both of them. And he says to the elder son too: 'Come home. Let go of your resentments and just rejoice in the security of my love. It's all yours.' (which is true by the way – as the younger son has already has his share, everything that was left truly is the elder son's – never forget that: to all elder children: *everything* the father has is yours).

We might identify more with one son or the other, but the message today is the same. **Come home**. The lovesick father is waiting for you. Will you come inside and celebrate with him?