

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Lent 4

18 March 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Joshua 5.2-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5. 16-21; Luke 15. 11-32

Sitting at table with Jesus

One of the favourite stories is of Johnny coming late into Sunday School to find the teacher already in the midst of telling a story. Oh good say Johnny I love stories. Am I in it. Yes says the teacher you are in it. Am I a goody or a baddy says Johnny?

You and are continually are in the story of scripture – as both goodies and baddies. That's what makes the Bible such an important and relevant book.

Take today's Gospel the story we have traditionally referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I wonder where you see yourself in this story Jesus told. There are lots of possibilities

The younger son (who becomes an outsider in far distant land) the older brother (an insider stays at home with the Father but in reality is far from him) . It is really story of 2 lost sons and father's attempt to regain them both as sons. Perhaps you see yourself as on of the townspeople; or the scribes and Pharisees or maybe the Father.

The key to understanding this parable is in the lead up to the parable when we are told that the scribes and Pharisees were grumbling and saying, “ This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable. We need to keep that context in mind as we look at what Jesus is saying through this simple yet powerful story.

We are likely to miss much of what Jesus' original hearers would have understood implicitly because we do not have the same cultural background. For what follows I am indebted to an English scholar Kenneth Bailey who has lived much of his life on the Middle East and immersed himself in that culture which in village areas is virtually unchanged to this day.

The parable begins with the request of the younger son, “Father, give me a share of property that falls to me”. Bailey writes,

“For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has almost always been emphatically the same. As I have noted elsewhere, the conversation runs as follows:

“Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?”

“Never!”

“Could anyone make such a request?”

“Impossible!”

“If any ever did, what would happen?”

“His father would beat him, of course!”

“Why?”

“This request means – he wants his father to die!” (1)

Bailey goes on to say that, “the startling fact is that to my knowledge, in all of Middle Eastern Literature (aside from this parable) from ancient to the present, there is no case of any son, older or younger, asking for his inheritance from a father who is still in good health” (2)

This son’s request is extra ordinary, culturally speaking, it is a profound insult to his father – in effect saying, “I can’t wait for you to die – I wish you were dead now!” The request can only be seen as a profound break of relationship between the father and the son. The boy is indeed lost.

In light of the implications of the request Bailey points out that it is all the more remarkable that the father concurs.

“In the Middle Eastern milieu the father is expected to explode and discipline the boy for the cruel implications of his demand. It is difficult to imagine a more dramatic illustration of the quality of love, which grants freedom even to reject the love than is shown here by the father.” (3)

So the Son sells up all his share of his father’s estate and leaves. He probably has no choice – for not only has he fractured his relationship with his father, but also with his brother and the whole community, who will have been amazed at such affrontery and contemptuous of such behaviour.

The next part of the story needs little comment. The Son goes off, lives it up and eventually finds himself destitute, penniless and friendless and needing to resort to the humiliating task (for a Jew) of feeding pigs. He eventually comes to his senses (literally “came to himself”) and reminds himself that even his father’s hired servants have food enough and to spare. So he resolves to return, prepared speech in mind. But note he is still determined to return as his own person – yes he has sinned against God and against his father and is no longer worthy to be called a son – but if he can work as a labourer, he will have food and to spare and so perhaps eventually he can redeem himself and pay back his father and so regain his sonship.

In returning he knows he will have to run the gauntlet of the village’s derision, and jeers and taunts. Even today it is not easy for someone who has emigrated to return to their home village unless they have made good! To return having to admit to failure or worse is difficult. So the Son can expect that he will be greeted with much hostility on his return. Jesus hearers would understand this and be thinking – brave fellow, he is in for a rough time when he gets home!

But the father, in his love for his boy, and his yearning to indeed have a son, has never stopped hoping and looking for his return. And so while the boy is still a long way off he sees him coming and he, the father, runs to greet him – thus sparing the Son from the communities’ taunts and jeers. The Father gets to him first – He runs. As Bailey notes “Middle Eastern gentlemen do not run in public. Boys run, owners of estates do not.” (4) Others fetch and run for them. The father runs, he wants to get to the boy, before the boy reaches the village and has to face the jeers and taunts of the community. Here is another sign of the remarkable compassion of the father for his Son.

Note that now when the Son makes his precociously prepared speech it contains the first two elements – Acknowledgement of sin against heaven and the father and declaration of unworthiness to be a son, but it does not conclude the request to be allowed to become a hired servant. Bailey makes out a compelling case that we should not see this as being because the father interrupts him as countless commentators have assumed through the centuries. But rather that the Son is overwhelmed by this overt public act of love of his father and realises that to offer to work as a servant is unworthy of him - it would be a failure to recognise and accept and receive the gift that is being offered – the gift of the father’s love and restoration to true sonship. So he gives up all attempt to earn his way, and accepts what is being offered, with its adherent cost – for he now not

only is indebted to his father but also the brother, for he will be living off what is essentially the brother's future inheritance. The father indeed has succeeded in finding and bringing back to life the Son who was lost. So the celebrations begin.

But there are two sons and the second Son is just as lost to the father as the first. Already Jesus' hearers would have been surprised at the older boy's behaviour at the beginning of the story. If the unthinkable were to happen and a son were to make such a request as the younger does in the story then any brother, and especially an older son would be expected to protest and take the father's side and refuse to have any part in such a division of the estate. His silence and acquiescence of the father's actions is a sign that he is not all that unhappy with his brother's request. He too is in effect saying "I can't wait for the old man to be dead!" He stays as the dutiful Son – all of his father's estate is now in a sense held in trust by the Father for his sake. So the Father has a responsibility to see that it is not squandered. The father has lost one son but surely this, the eldest is still his son. Yet by his actions and words we come to see that this son too is lost to the father – not really a son at all – but rather a dutiful servant who sees himself as a "slave" and resents that he has not been given a goat to celebrate with his friends. He cannot even bring himself to call the younger son, his brother, rather it is "This son of yours". So this Son refuses to go in and join the celebrations. He too humiliates his father publicly and forces the father to go out and remonstrate with him as the father seeks to gain the son back too! And the story abruptly stops. We are left not knowing what the oldest son's response is!

Jesus is a master storyteller. Its as if he has been telling the story of the play – with the actors on the stage, being the father and two sons and the community - But remember who the story is being told to – who the audience is –the grumbling Scribes and Pharisees. Here at the end it's as if now Jesus and the Scribes and the Pharisees are also on the stage and Jesus is saying to them. And here I quote from Bailey again,

"You accuse me of welcoming sinners and eating with them. You are correct. This is precisely what I *do*. But I do not do it at night behind the door. Rather in broad daylight and before assembled guests, I search out sinners that I might by any means convince them to come in and eat with me. But my dear friends, do you not understand that this costly offer of love is made for outcasts *and* "incasts," for runaways and stay-at-homes, for prodigals *and* older sons... for the sinners *and* the Pharisees, for tax collectors and for scribes? In the parable, the actions of the father in the courtyard are my actions. You are the older son. Costly love was offered the prodigal. Even more costly love is offered to the older son. In spite of your hostility to me and my actions, I love you and urge you to sit and eat with me. When I sit and eat with sinners, we are not celebrating their sin but my costly love. That same costly love is now offered to you. My banquet table is spread. If you accept, then the banquet is an occasion of even greater joy. I seek not only them but also you! Come! Be reconciled to your brother! Accept the love I offer! I know that you are offended at my table fellowship with sinners. But *do you not understand*, my dear friends, that *if I do not sit and eat with sinners, then I cannot sit and eat with you!*" (5).

I said at the beginning, where do you find yourself in this story. I suspect all of at times can identify with the younger son, for there are times when we all get lost, and muck things up, squander what we have. All of us have been in need of the kind of forgiveness and compassion the father shows to this son. Equally its not hard to identify with the stay at home son, the one who seeks to do the right thing and has a sense of the unfairness of it all as others seem to get away with all many of things and even prosper despite their obvious decadent life-style. Henry Nouwen in his book "The Prodigal Son challenges us by insisting that it isn't enough to find ourselves in either brother but rather ultimately he challenges us to find ourself in the father. To live out the same costly love in all of our living and relating. For we are addressed and challenged by this story, just as the scribes and Pharisees were. To identify with and accept those who our society might want to marginalise, push away, dissociate itself from.

That is why we cannot as followers of Jesus have anything to do with any form of violence – of rejecting and pushing away those who are different who we perceive as a threat. That is why we must be appalled at our Governments’ treatment of Asylum seekers with the decision to send the Sri Lankan group to Nauru; why we cannot agree with Fred Nile’s call for a 10 year moratorium on Muslim Immigration; why we cannot agree with the church’s condemnation of Gay and lesbian persons. If we cannot sit at table with Muslims, with asylum seekers with people of same gender sexual orientation then we will not be sitting at table with Jesus.

Notes.

1. “Poet and Peasant” K.E. Bailey; Eerdmans 1976 p161,2
2. “Poet and Peasant” K.E. Bailey; Eerdmans 1976 p164
3. “Poet and Peasant” K.E. Bailey; Eerdmans 1976 p165
4. “Finding the Lost” K.E. Bailey; Concordia 1992 p143,4
5. “Finding the Lost” K.E. Bailey; Concordia 1992 p188