

Parable of the Loving Father Luke 15:11-32/1 John 1:8-9

This morning we are looking at what I have called the Parable of the Loving Father. Now you will almost certainly know it better as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it has been suggested and I agree that it skews the story to put the focus, as we so often do, just on the younger son. Before I say any more, I just want to show you some pictures that I have brought along that I hope may move you as much as they move me. I also would like to recommend this book, "The Return of the Prodigal Son" by Henri Nouwen. It is a reflection of the parable in the light of his own life and of a particular journey involving a whole new way of living that he undertook and like all of Nouwen's writing is well worth reading.

This first picture is Rembrandt's interpretation of the moment of the return of the prodigal son. It is an incredibly moving picture. All of the characters are here, the father, both the sons, the servants and even, though difficult to see, the mother in the shadows. One of the reasons that I find it interesting that the mother (not mentioned in the story) is present in the painting is because if you look closely, the father has one male hand and one female hand, which would seem to speak of the father, who of course is symbolic of God, having the compassion of both a father and a mother. Nouwen says of this picture that without a doubt Rembrandt had a deep understanding of the meaning of spiritual homecoming and that it made him aware of his need to walk step by step towards the One who awaits him with open arms and wants to hold him in an eternal embrace. Whether we remember the feeling of the comfort and safety of a parents embrace or not, I believe that it is a fundamental spiritual longing in each and every human being - to be

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held in God's eternal loving embrace. Nouwen describes Rembrandt as having painted father and son, God and humanity, compassion and misery, in one circle of love.

The second picture is a photograph of a sculpture by a contemporary artist called Charlie Mackesy. He was a confirmed atheist who was surprised to discover the reality of God and has done many studies of this subject. The third picture is of a print of his called, The Prodigal Daughter which he painted for a friend who suffers from bi-polar disorder. The complexity of the expression on the father's face is extraordinary, so much pain and love.

So, back to the story. The story begins - there was a man who had two sons. This is the story of a human father, yes the story is symbolic of our heavenly father but like almost all of the parables it is set very much here on earth and very relatable. The younger son asked for his share of his father's estate and then left and proceeded to squander his wealth in wild living. It was not a part of the culture to ask for your inheritance before your father had died, this was not a done thing. It would have been shocking, not least because it would have been understood as the son in effect saying to his father, I wish you were dead, or you are dead to me. It would have been a total rejection of his father's values, lifestyle, culture, religion, of everything that his father was. We are told that after he had spent it all there was a famine and the son was in need. So much so that he hired himself out as a swineherd, possibly the most shameful and lowest things a Jewish person could do, pigs being one of the most unclean of animals. And he was so poor that he was starving. Eventually he came to his senses and realised that even his

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father's servants were well fed, and he needed to head back home and beg for his father's forgiveness. Now we might imagine that having been treated so badly the father might consider the son as dead to him and tried to forget him. I have known families hold grudges and unforgiveness for far less offences. But no, this father still loved his son and was longing for him to come home. In order to have seen him from such a long way off, the father must have been looking out for him every single day. Was he angry and full of recriminations, no - he had compassion on him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. He didn't wait until he was cleaned up, had a bath, washed the pig stink off him, he ran to embrace him. Nicky Gumbel tells the story of seeing a father at an airport waiting for his wife and child. The child had been very sick and was covered in vomit but as he ran in to his father's arms the dad scooped him up and hugged and kissed him. The father of the prodigal son embraced his pig stinking son, ordered robes to be brought for him and a party thrown in his honour. The inference is clear, it doesn't matter what we have done, where we have been, how unclean we might feel, the minute we turn back to Him and move towards Him, our heavenly Father will run to us, forgive us and embrace us. We have all been there, our reading from 1 John reminds us that we have all sinned, we have all at some time by our thoughts, or our behaviour, turned away from God, rejected Him, eschewed His love, betrayed His values and gone our own way. And whenever we have done that, all we have had to do is to want to be forgiven and we are embraced and restored, this is surely amazing and wonderful. But this is the Parable of the Father, and the father has two sons. What of the older son? He refuses to come into the party,

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and just as the Father has been watching out for the younger son, he immediately goes to find the older son and plead with him. The younger son lost everything and was painfully aware of all that he lost. But the older son does not understand or appreciate all that he has. The father has never withheld anything from him. Any austerity that he has lived with, he has imposed on himself. And what is more he is consumed with jealousy and judgement. He has served his father well and feels it is only just that the son who has abused his father's love should be punished. We might agree with him - after all this hardly seems fair. In fact even the younger son might have agreed with him - he was expecting to grovel and then only to be allowed to be a lowly servant in the household, as justice for his appalling behaviour. Did he get what he deserved? No! He received grace and mercy and love in exchange for his hatred and disobedience and disgrace. Do we get what we deserve? No! We too have had our sins forgiven, forgotten, blotted out, washed away with no trace. We have received no punishment from God for the wrong things we have done. Don't get me wrong, sometimes in this world there are consequences for wrongdoing, debts have to be paid, crimes against others paid for. But from God's point of view, as soon as we turn to Him and ask for His forgiveness, we are welcomed and embraced. So then is the self-righteous, graceless, unforgiving older brother, in fact any better than his younger sibling? Are his sins any less offensive? Maybe we feel like the older brother more often than we like to admit. Are we ever offended by God's grace towards others? Especially those whose behaviour and character we find questionable? Are we ever judgemental? Do we ever have feelings of superiority? Entitlement? And if we do, does

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our Father love us any less? No! He longs for the older brother to join in the freedom of grace and forgiveness and mercy every bit as much as He longs for the return of the dissolute younger brother. There is grace and mercy enough for both brothers and for each of us. There is room in the Father's embrace for everyone, the moment we turn towards our heavenly Father we are welcomed into that eternal embrace, to that spiritual homecoming, into that circle of love.