

## The Father's love

Back at the start of Chapter 15, we read that “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus”. Those outcast groups were feeling called to listen to Jesus, and that seems to upset or offend the ‘good people’ – the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who Luke tells us muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them”.

Jesus doesn't respond to the muttering directly, but instead Jesus goes on to tell a series of parables. Luke's gospel doesn't tell us to whom he told those parables, it just says Jesus told ‘them’ this parable. It could have been the tax collectors and sinners, it could have been the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, or it could have been all of them.

He told them three parables – known as the Parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son – and it's the third one, the parable of the Lost Son, that we've heard today. It's more commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but there is some thought that it should be known as the Parable of the Two Sons, or perhaps the Parable of the Generous Father.

Whatever you might like to call it though, it begins with Jesus telling his listeners them that “There was a man who had two sons.”

The younger one said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate”.

Do you realise the significance of that? How would you feel if your child came to you and said “I know once you die, I'll get my inheritance. Let's cut to the chase and give it to me now.”

The younger son is effectively rejecting his father. “I don't want you Dad, I just want what you can give me”. Which, according to Jewish custom would have been one third of what his father had.

The familiarity of this parable can take the significance of this away. The younger son says, more or less, “Dad, I wish you were dead”.

You might expect anger, or at least shock, at that. But the parable doesn't give us any of that. It seems that the father says, “Well, if that's what you want” and he divides the property between his sons. Jewish custom allowed for this to happen, but the father would have retained control of the eldest son's inheritance until his death.

Having rejected his father, and taken a third of the estate, the younger son goes even further. And quite literally too, because we heard in verse 13 that he went to a distant country.

And I say he goes further, because in doing that he leaves his country, his father's country, he leaves the nation of Israel, he leaves God's chosen people. He effectively rejects God.

But he had a good time. He had a great time. He was wealthy, and he made the most of his wealth. We read that he squandered his wealth on wild living. He might not have heard the saying that money can't buy happiness, and even if he had, he wasn't paying much attention to it.

But then things go bad. Verse 14 tells us that he'd spent everything, and a famine struck the whole country. The younger son found himself broke and in a foreign land. The best he could do to try to sustain himself was to hire himself out to one of the locals to feed his pigs.

Pigs, of course, were unclean to Jewish people. This was about the most demeaning job anyone could have. But he was desperate and he took it.

Even then, though, it wasn't sufficient. In because we heard that longed to fill his stomach with the pods (15:16) – the waste product of human food production – that the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything. The pigs were effectively more valuable to his employer than he was.

What could he do?

He had no way to earn a proper living in that foreign country. He was desperate, and in his desperation, he realised that back home, his father's hired hands were better off than he was. And not just a little bit better off: he knew that they would have food to spare.

But he'd rejected his father. He'd rejected his country. And he'd rejected God.

So he decides to throw himself on his father's mercy.

He plans his plea, and I can imagine him repeated it over and over on the way home: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; so make me like one of your hired men."

He wasn't pleading for his status to be restored. He wasn't pleading for any special consideration. "I am sorry. I did the wrong thing. Please just give me a job".

And with that prepared, Jesus tells us that the younger son got up and went to his father. Don't forget that he is in a distant country – the journey home, with no money, would not be easy.

Meanwhile at home, life was continuing. The elder son was working the remaining estate; working hard for his father, "slaving away", being completely loyal and never disobeying orders (15:29). After all, the estate that he was working would one day all be his.

And what of their father?

We don't know, there's nothing in this parable to tell us what he was doing. It's one of those details that our imaginations can fill in. There's often an idea that the father was sad, that he missed his younger son, and that he would sort of stand every day looking off into the distance along the road his younger son had taken all that time ago. Hoping that his lost son would return.

We don't know.

Perhaps he was out working in the fields and just happened to look up at the right time and see his younger son in the distance.

Because while he was still a long way off, the father saw the younger son and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son – and running is not something that Jewish men – Jewish *patriarchs* do! – he ran to his son and threw his arms around him and kissed him.

And you can imagine what state the younger son would have been in, having left his job feeding pigs – which didn't pay enough to feed himself properly – and travelled from the distant country all the way home. Barefoot. He would have been filthy, he would have been emaciated, he would have smelled of pigs and sweat.

And yet his father ran to him and threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The younger son immediately begins his plea, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But his father cuts him off there: the son doesn't get to ask to be made like one of the hired men.

And his father cuts him off by telling the servants "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring from his finger and sandals on his feet." (15:22) There's no hesitation from the father. He first ran to meet him, *while he was still a long way off*, and now he clothes his son extravagantly – a robe and sandals might not necessarily be that extravagant, but a ring certainly is.

And he doesn't stop there: "Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate".

He is rejoicing. The return of the lost son is good news, and good news needs to be celebrated.

The father explains why he is so joyous: "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (15:24a).

So they began to celebrate. And that's where our first reading today ended and where the Sunday School edition of this parable ends – with rejoicing because the prodigal son has returned.

But the parable doesn't end there. The partying had begun, but not everyone was celebrating.

Our second reading started at verse 25, and we heard that the man's older son was in the field. He wasn't there for his younger brother's return – and as he returned to the house he heard the music and dancing – he heard the party – but didn't know what was being celebrated. So he called out to one of the servants and asked him what was going on (15:26).

When the older son heard what was being celebrated he became angry and refused to go in and celebrate. His brother's come back – from the dead, effectively, so he should be happy, right?

But he's not, because while his brother's been off in a distant land squandering a third of the family fortune, he's been at home. Working for his father. Slaving for his father. Always obeying his father.

He deserves better! Don't you think he deserves better? It's just not fair.

I think we can all relate at least a bit to the older brother. So often our hard work, our dedication, seems to go unrecognised or unappreciated. Whether it's in workplaces, or in families or even in churches. Quiet, hardworking diligence isn't very dramatic, so it's not often celebrated – even though workplaces and families and churches rely on it.

But we don't undertake all that quiet hard work in order to be celebrated or rewarded. Even so, it doesn't seem fair, does it, that others who appear to do less are celebrated and rewarded?

But the father is a father to both his sons.

And just like he went out to the younger son, he goes out to the older one as well (15:28). But rather than the son pleading with the father, this time, it's the father who pleads with the older son.

The older son isn't consoled, though: "Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you have never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends".

It's not fair. It's just NOT fair! The gospel doesn't tell us, but I'm sure he stomped his foot.

He doesn't even refer to his brother as "my brother" – he calls him "This son of yours". This son of yours who squandered your property with prostitutes.

In response, the father opens his heart to his elder son: "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

While it might not have seemed fair to the elder son, the response of the father to the return of the prodigal is the right response. The elder son has worked harder, and longer, and is legally the heir of the father, but his lost son has returned. And it is right to celebrate.

Indeed from verse 7 of this chapter, Jesus says, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent".

Jesus doesn't tell us how the elder son responds, and the next chapter of Luke moves to a different context, so the story of the elder son is left hanging. It ends with the father pleading with, and pouring his heart out to the elder son.

How do you think the elder son would respond? How would you respond?

There's often, I think, a feeling in churches that we work hard, but all over the place congregations decline and people drift away. And that's not fair, is it? Is it that some people aren't really pulling their weight? Or that other churches or denominations are stealing worshippers? Or that there isn't enough help from the presbytery or the synod or the bishop or whoever?

We've been slaving away for God and never disobeying his orders, haven't we? Don't we deserve better?

We who are members of the body of Christ, have been reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus – there is no better reward. In turning to God, we have been like the younger son, we confess our sins (as we have done this morning), and we are forgiven.

And that happened even when we were still far off. God didn't send Jesus to us because we were nice people, or because of our hard work, God sent Jesus to us because God loves us, and he wants to celebrate our return to him.

We have all been like the younger son. So let's not be like the elder son. Let's not claim rights due to our service or piousness or generosity. Let's always join in the celebration of the generosity and grace of God. We were once lost, but now are found.

Amen.