**While we were still a long way off - Luke’s Gospel and The Prodigal Son**

**Wesley 24.01.16**

So. Who are you in the story of the Prodigal Son? I think that is one of the key questions Jesus was asking when he told this parable in response to the Pharisees who were grumbling about the company he kept. The kind of company that included sinners and tax collectors, the lowest of the low. Let’s start with the prodigal himself. He is perhaps the easiest to identify with and the obvious place to start.

The prodigal son is a perfect example of the hyperbole Jesus uses in his parables to make a point. Jesus paints a very grave picture of him indeed. Firstly he asks his father for his share of his inheritance before his father has died. This is the equivalent of saying ‘I wish you were dead’. The ultimate in disrespect to one’s father. Then Jesus tells us that the younger son gathers all he has and travelled to a distant country. In other words, he left no ties at all to his family and his home, and he leaves for a place far away from Israel. He places himself a long way from his Jewish roots.

It gets worse - he squanders the inheritance he wasn’t really entitled to on pleasures of the flesh. It is this part of the story that gives us the term ‘prodigal’ - a wasteful, reckless and extravagant person. And so the young son finds himself destitute in a time of famine. Now Jesus lays it on thick with the final insult - the prodigal has no choice but to work in the fields feeding pigs - an unclean animal for a good Jewish boy. He is brought as low as he can be. He is as far from home and family and roots as he can be.

And it is from there that he begins to turn back, not expecting to be welcomed back as a son, but willing to return home and to his father simply as a servant - that would be a better situation to be in than the one he is currently in. He prepares a speech and sets off home.

And here we come to the father, who does something remarkable. The prodigal son doesn’t get to deliver his speech before his father has come running to greet him and embrace him. It is remarkable because people simply did not run to greet their children. Heads of households certainly did not run to greet wayward sons who had wished them dead. But this father does. This father is so overwhelmed with joy to see the son that deserted him, severed all ties with him, and took himself as far away as possible from family and responsibility.

And the line that gets me every time I read this passage is the line that says ‘While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.’ The father doesn’t wait to hear what the son has to say. He doesn’t even know for sure that the son has come back to apologise. He runs to greet him anyway, to embrace him anyway.

And what other response could the son give to this? Surely only to fall into his father’s arms and be reconciled? He does try to apologise but his father is too busy calling for the best robes and giving instructions for a celebration feast.

So perhaps the father and the prodigal son have something in common then. They are both willing to humble themselves before the other. The young son takes a hefty swallow of his pride in order to return as a mere servant on his father’s estate. His father meanwhile throws convention and status to the wind as joy at the return of his younger son gets the better of him. Love means a lot more than position.

And this brings us to the elder son. As I mentioned earlier, we are used to putting ourselves in the place of the prodigal son in this story, those who are far from perfect but are nonetheless forgiven and welcomed by God and that’s really not such a bad place to be. But what about the far less attractive prospect of being the elder son? We have to think of ourselves in those terms too I think in order to fully appreciate what Jesus has to say to us in the parable.

The picture Jesus paints of the elder son is not a pretty one either. He becomes angry as soon as he hears that his father is celebrating his wayward brother’s return and Jesus tells us that he refuses to go in. He refuses to join the celebrations for his younger brother. In fact he goes even further - he refuses to acknowledge his younger brother, addressing him as ‘this son of yours’ when speaking to his father.

And then the reasons for this bitterness and anger come out. The elder son has never really seen himself as a son at all. He sees himself as a slave, a mere servant of the father. All he has done for his father he has done out of duty not really out of love. And this has diminished what he has been able to receive in return. Crucially he doesn’t know himself loved by his father. He doesn't recognise that he too has placed himself far away from his father. He too is in need of forgiveness and reconciliation. But he cannot see it and he does not know it.

The uncomfortable truth is that we are all sometimes like this. We can go through the motions of being dutiful Christians without really feeling it, without really knowing just how much our Father loves us. And from that place of distance, we sometimes look at others less deserving of the Father’s love and we are bitter. Uncomfortable though that is, it is important that we acknowledge this.

But look at what the father does in response to the elder son’s anger and bitterness? He does exactly the same as for the younger son - he goes to him. He goes out from the celebration to meet with his elder son and to reassure him of his love for him. Again, the father humbles himself for the sake of reconciliation. He reaches out to his elder son and invites him into the family fold, invites him to rejoice at the return of his brother.

And there Jesus leaves us. That is where the story ends. We do not know whether the elder son is reconciled with his father and his younger brother. We do not know whether the prodigal son mends his ways for good. But it is perhaps an ending that leaves us with the question we began with - who are we now in this story. Or perhaps another way of putting it is WHERE are we now in this story?

Where we are in this story and our direction of travel are all important. Are we, like the prodigal son, intent on taking ourselves as far away as we can from God, putting as much distance as we can form the responsibilities we have as sons and daughters of God? Living in the now, just to please ourselves?

Or perhaps we are on our way back to God. Perhaps we have realised just how far we have travelled away and realise our need to turn back, to make amends, to be reconciled.

Perhaps we are like the elder son, who may not have travelled anywhere in geographical terms but was just as far away from his father as his brother was. The distance between him and his father was in the barrier he had erected with his own self-righteousness, with his sense of indignation that his reckless, wayward brother was the cause of celebration. And with the sense of being not a beloved child but a mere servant.

If, this morning, we are in any of those places, then we can rest assured that the father who came running to meet the prodigal son, the same father who came out to persuade the indignant elder brother to come in and celebrate. That Father comes to meet us too. Wherever and whoever we are.

And that is one of the great themes of Luke’s Gospel. The God who reconciles through the ministry and sacrifice Jesus Christ. Indeed the animal that represents Luke’s Gospel is the ox because this Gospel highlights the sacrificial nature of Christ’s ministry. This reconciling and sacrificial ministry is God’s initiative not ours. It is the Father who comes running to meet us way before we reach him, way before we deserve it. All we have to do is to fall into our Father’s arms.

And that is another great theme of Luke’s - a welcome for those who are a long way off, seemingly far away from God, those on the edges, the margins of life. Those who we might think of as ‘the other’. Think of Jesus’ manifesto in Luke chapter 4 to bring good news to the poor. Think of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who Jesus chooses to eat with, even before he has done any repenting. Think of the woman with a shady past who Jesus allows to anoint him. Think of the thief on the cross who is promised a welcome in paradise. Think of the words of Jesus on the cross ‘Father, forgive.’

The arms of God are spread wide in the Jesus of Luke’s Gospel. And it foreshadows Luke’s sequel - the book of Acts - in which the good news spreads beyond Jerusalem and Israel out into the wider world, out amongst the gentile people. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan - God is at work in those who are considered outsiders.

But let us return to the arms of the Father for a moment, to the moment at which we feel ourselves and know ourselves loved and accepted and reconciled by God. Comforting though it is to rest here for a while, and we must, we MUST truly know ourselves loved and forgiven, we cannot stay in that embrace because it is an embrace that has consequences.

Henri Nouwen in his excellent book ‘The Return of the Prodigal’ writes that although we might see ourselves as the prodigal and the elder son, ultimately, we must all become the like the Father. We, in our turn, must witness to the love and acceptance and reconciliation we have received by running to greet those who are still along way off with arms outstretched. We in our turn must be willing to embrace the other. We in our turn must see all people as the Father sees them.

Luke tells us that his Gospel is written as a witness to all that has happened. And the book of Acts tells the ongoing story of those witnesses. What better way to witness to our own experience of the Father than to become like the one who seeks to embrace all people with arms of love and reconciliation. Amen.