

Rev Lucas Taylor Reflection 31 March 2019 Manningham Uniting Church, Doncaster

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

5:16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

5:17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

5:18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

5:19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

5:20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

15:2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

15:3 So he told them this parable:

15:11b "There was a man who had two sons.

15:12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.

15:13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

15:14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

15:15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

15:16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

15:17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

15:18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

15:19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

15:20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

15:21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

15:22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

15:23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

15:24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

15:25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

15:26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

15:27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

15:28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

15:29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

15:30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

15:31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

15:32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

REFLECTION

Video - Opening Scene of *Love Actually*

I was 17 years old when Princess Diana died in a car accident in Paris.

It was the first instance I can remember of a 24 hour a day, world consuming - we interrupt this program - type of news coverage event. I was alive for the fall of the Berlin wall but I wasn't in charge of the TV remote and I clearly didn't understand its significance at the time. I remember asking my mum after Princess Diana's death is this what it was like when JFK was assassinated? Is this what that sort of event looks and feels like?

I'm sure we'll all have our own memories of that event, but one of mine was the conversation that followed regarding Princess Diana's contrasting personality and parenting style compared to the Queen and other members of the Royal family. Do you remember that?

I recall striking footage of a young Queen Elizabeth returning from some weeks of absence with royal duties to greet a waiting boy Prince Charles on the train platform. There was a nod of recognition, a stiff hand on the shoulder and a carrying on with official duties. This was contrasted with decades later footage of Princess Di, reuniting with her boys after some days away, sweeping past officials and royal attendants to swoop upon her children with arms thrown wide, abandoning herself to the joy of rectifying the pain of their separation.

I don't doubt the genuineness of the love the Queen holds for her children of course and I sure it was incredibly difficult to be both a mother and a sovereign head of state and, of course, they were different times and all that... but still - only one of those encounters called be called *prodigal*.

(A reminder - you'll remember I'm sure but I'll mention again in case: the word prodigal is often used - due to this story no doubt - to describe something lost that has returned. Someone's taken a long time to pop up the shops to buy some milk "ah the prodigal one has returned!" we might sarcastically declare... but of course this is not the correct use of the word. *Prodigal* means "wastefully extravagant, spending or using resources freely and recklessly". It is the younger son's squandering of his father's money that earns him the tag *prodigal*, not his welcomed return home.

I assume it comes from the same root word as prodigious "remarkably or impressively great in extent, size or degree." We might say a gifted musician is prodigiously talented - it carries a sense that the artist has more talent than they need, have talent to spare, to waste.

Today's Gospel scripture tells the familiar story widely known as the *prodigal son*, though that name is not given by the teller of the story (reported by the writer to be Jesus), or the writer/recorder of the story (the writer of Luke/Acts). In fact, if we were to infer a name for this story from either Jesus or the Gospel writer we could reasonably assume it would be called the *Lost Son*, as it appears as the third of three stories: the first two being the lost sheep and the lost coin. All three stories involve a separation, a search or a wait, and a reunion.

This story of the father with two sons differs from the sheep and coin story though, in length - it is much longer - and in its focus. The reader (and listener) is taken into the world of the one who is lost in much greater detail. We learn of his journey through enjoyment to disillusionment to despair. In the first two stories the reader stays with the one who *has* lost, the one who is searching. In this third story we start with the father (the one who has lost, the searcher, the await-er) but depart with and follow the one who *is* lost. We don't hear about what adventures the sheep had on its jaunt away from the heard. We don't follow the coin as it rolls across the floor behind the cabinet and into the crevice between the tiles. But this thread story obviously seeks to add something to the earlier two stories; a new layer, greater depth.

So even though we are given this detail of the second son's experiences when he squanders his inheritance, wastes the fruits of his father's hard work, perhaps the literary context of this story is encouraging our focus to remain, at least for some time, with the father.

Last time I preached on this reading (you remember? back on March 6th 2016?) We explored the ways in which the father was prodigal. He "wastes" his dignity (running out to greet his son, baring his legs as he ran - an action beneath his status), his honour (throwing himself around the neck of the one who literally wished him dead by claiming his inheritance early, and wastes his right to exact punishment. He throws that all away as unimportant in comparison to just having his son back.

Considering this story again today I wonder if part of the contrast of this to the stories of the lost sheep and coin stories is inviting us to consider the role of *obligation*. In what ways are the shepherd, the woman and the father *obliged* to act in the ways they did and in what ways did they exceed or surpass obligation?

Perhaps the listener might have said to Jesus, well the shepherds job is to look after the sheep - of course they have to go after one they have lost. It would be taken from their pay otherwise... Or of course the woman is going to look for the coin she dropped – that's worth money! she is rewarded financially for the search!

Carmen Retzlaff writes: (<https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2019/03/28/wild-lectionary-the-prodigal-parent/>)

The prodigal parent in this parable is the father who gives not out of obligation or according to who deserves pay by producing good works, but out of extravagant, intemperate, love. The father gives to both children: to the faithful worker, the father is even more faithful, always providing for every need; and to the child who recklessly throws away his gifts, the father gives from the joy of finding a lost love.

Recall the point of realisation for the second son when he faces his despair and decides to beg to return home. He thinks to himself - even my father's workers are looked after fairly. So for him, it is a bargaining point to offer to come back to simply fair treatment. This shows he recognises his father has always treated him better than fair! The prodigal child has realised his relationship with his father has always existed on the father's grace. Yes the son worked on the family farm, but so did all the hired hands, yet the father housed, fed, clothed and raised him, loved him as a son. Being a child of the landowner was not simply a birthright - it was a lived and embodied experience.

Having broken the grace covenant by demanding his father provide what he is obliged, he is now hoping his father will agree to rebuild the relationship on transactional obligation. I'll work for you just like a hired hand, and please just provide for me what that work deserves.

But at his return of course the father refuses to settle for obligation. He desires relationship. It is not the worker he has missed. It is not the hands to herd the goats or pick the grapes he has waited for, longed for. It is his beloved *son*.

This story clearly takes the relationship beyond the point of obligation so the listener/reader is no longer in any doubt. This is a relationship of grace.

...and love has the ability to create from nothing.

“to the child who recklessly throws away his gifts, the father gives from the joy of finding a lost love.”

When the child throws away all that was obliged to him, that's not the end of it. In fact it is the birthing point of something new. That's what the eldest son can't understand - the endless capacity of love to generate, create and embrace. *Hang on - he's had his share! That's it isn't it?!*

Nope, not even close. there is a new creation: everything old (the relationship of obligation) has passed away; see, everything has become new!

1 Corinthians 13 - **4** Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, **5** it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, **6** it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. **7** Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

8 Love never fails.

If God is love, as the writer of John declares, then all of the descriptions in 1 Corinthians apply.

Recently on the radio I heard an interview with a scientist who is developing and advocating a system for the urban farming of food. It designed to convert spaces in cities into food producing spaces to cut down on transport costs and environmental impacts as well as distribute the load of food production for our population. The revolutionary part of it is that the system is soilless and can happen indoors.

Specially designed LED lights provide the appropriate spectrum of light normally provided by the sun and a scientifically concocted mist of just the right nutrients is sprayed across the exposed roots as the plant is suspended in hanging baskets or mesh bags.

It's a fascinating (and probably necessary) evolution in food production.

But I can help note the contrast as an analogy to obligation and grace.

Here we have a scientific way of producing food - a tight calculation of nutrient in equals food out. It's a relationship of obligation. Compare and contrast that with the organic, natural method of food production: the sun that shines on the crop and the weed alike, the rain that falls on the parched and the swamped. Nutrients contained in a rain drop that misses the leaf, but falls to the soil, enriching it, sweeping on past to nourish other parts of the ecosystem, abundantly, wastefully, prodigally.

Carmen Retzlaff concludes:

The story of the prodigal parent is the story of unconditional love and giving. God is like that. Nature is like that. In this parable, we are the runaway child, taking our gifts for granted, using the gifts of the earth and this life without thought, and expecting recrimination; and we are the hardworking child, who sees scarcity where there is abundance. And the giving parent is there to take us into their arms, no matter what, and give more.

May we live lives of prodigious, prodigal love, beyond all obligation, letting go of old things and becoming a part of God's renewal of all things.

Amen.