

St. Aidan's West Epping, 31st March 2019

“THE PRODIGAL FATHER”

(Joshua 5:2-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:11-32)

“A person is known by the company he keeps”. A very old statement linked with Aesop, the writer of fables. And it's got a fair amount of truth to it. Parents often worry about the type of friends their children make: that they will be a good influence not a bad influence. Politicians get into trouble if they seem to be getting too close to the wrong individuals or the wrong parties. And over recent years, people's demands that asylum seekers be treated with justice are often responded to with the claim that they are bad people, and it would be bad for them to be allowed to come to Australia. We don't want people like them mixing with us. That claim is of course very questionable: but there are certainly influential people trying to persuade us that it's not good to have that sort of company.

Jesus got into trouble for the company he was keeping. As a preacher and teacher, he hadn't done himself any favours by basing himself up north in Galilee. He should have spent a decent time in Jerusalem where the proper teachers and the experts were based, and he would be able to make sure that his message was right and that his teaching was approved. But not only that: he had gathered a motley group of mainly Galileans around him, certainly not experts: these people had done no proper training, and in fact he had taught them himself.

But the worst thing about Jesus was the other people he was spending time with. He spent so much time with the wrong kind of people: spiritual outsiders – people regarded as particularly sinful, people who probably would seldom be seen at the synagogue where decent moral religious people went. He even spent time with prostitutes and those terrible tax collectors, who lined their own pockets as they collected for the Roman occupying forces. How could a man who claimed to be a spiritual teacher associate with these kinds of people – and even seem to enjoy their friendship?

The question was often asked, especially by the Pharisees. On other occasions Jesus had responded by talking about people being unwell and needing a doctor. He had come to fulfil that need. But in Luke 15, we find three stories that Jesus told in response to this accusation.

Firstly the sheep that got lost, and after a great search it was found again. It might have been only one out of a hundred, but there was a great celebration when the sheep was found.

Then the coin that was lost, and after a great search it was found again. It was only one among ten coins, but there was a great celebration when the lost coin was found. Jesus had come to seek those who were lost.

And then comes the lost son: one of Jesus' best-known parables. It is often called “The Prodigal Son”, and certainly the son was prodigal in wasting his inheritance.

But I wonder whether the truly prodigal – the extravagantly generous - person in the story is the father. His younger son had come to him and said in effect: “Father I don't want to wait for you to die until I receive my inheritance. I want it now.” And as soon as his father gives this son his share of the property, he sells it, goes to a distant country, and throws away his money in an extravagant and questionable lifestyle. Then he finds himself penniless and helpless in a time of drought.

He has in effect disowned his father, and no doubt caused him a great deal of embarrassment in the community. He has disowned his family, his nation, his faith, and his way of life. He has gone so low that he is willing to feed pigs in order to at least get some pay: something no self-respecting Jew would ever do. Even then the pay was so low that the pigs were eating better than he was.

And then he realizes that back home his father's servants are far better off than he is now. Could it be that his father will have him back at least as a servant? He knows that he has caused huge offence to his father and his family. Perhaps they will refuse to have anything to do with him. Perhaps they will make him squirm for all he has done to them. “Why are you coming back here? You've made a mess of your life, and now you want us to solve your problems! You've made your own bed: now lie in it!”

No doubt his motives are very mixed, just as ours often are. But back home he goes. And as we heard in the reading, his father is not only waiting for him: he runs out to greet him, a very demeaning thing to do, and that greeting is warm and welcoming indeed!

The son begins his words of sorrow and humility, but his father is much more concerned with the joy of having his son restored and back home. “Get him good clothes: clothes that are befitting for a son of the house. And let’s have a party.” The son was not worthy, but he was welcomed back enthusiastically. And there was a great celebration when he came back home.

But of course there is a second part to this story. It was the younger son who went off and disowned his family. But the older son stayed home and worked hard as he always had. And what is his reaction when he hears that his brother has returned, and that there is a big party to celebrate? He reacts in what I think is a very natural way. “It’s not fair. It’s not right. He doesn’t deserve all this.” He argues with his father. “I’ve slaved for you all these years. I’ve never disobeyed you. And yet you’ve never given me anything so that I could have a party with my friends. You may call him your son, but he’s not my brother.”

It’s quite understandable. But this son seems to think of himself as more like his father’s slave than his father’s son. It was all about duty and nothing about love. His brother was lost and is now found. Perhaps his older brother has been lost all the time!

We know the point of this story of Jesus. God welcomes sinners back. We humans are lost because we so often live lives cut off from God because of our own self-centredness and sin. But God is always seeking those who are lost, and he welcomes them back into his family and his house.

Of course, we need to recognize that all of us are lost, all of us need to open up to our loving Creator God. And as we come back to God, we need to be willing to live as God’s people. We need to repent, to turn away from our own agenda and to recognize God’s claim on our lives. God generously offers us forgiveness through Jesus Christ, not just our Teacher but our Saviour. God treats us as his forgiven and reconciled people, members of his eternal and beloved family. It’s effectively a new creation, a new world, as Paul describes in in our reading from 2 Corinthians.

It’s worth asking ourselves which son we are like. Some of us have seen our own lives turned upside-down because of the love of God in Jesus Christ. We might see ourselves as having been very much like the lost son, quite on the wrong path, but then we have been found and forgiven and welcomed back into God’s family.

But others of us have more or less lived our lives seeing ourselves as members of God’s family. We don’t claim to be perfect, but it seems that we have always been members of the church, we have always tried to live reasonably godly lives, we haven’t done really bad things.

In that sense we may be in a position like those scribes and Pharisees who were so critical of Jesus. There is always the temptation for people like us to judge, to exclude. Many of us can remember the days when Protestant children were told not to play with Catholic children, and vice versa. We weren’t told to avoid the Orthodox because we didn’t know who they were, and of course most of us hadn’t met a Moslem. We now live in days when politicians and leaders are quick to put up barriers, to seek to divide people; days when we are called to judge and reject people who are not like us. But Jesus welcomed even those people whose lifestyle he knew was wrong. He cared about them, and lovingly pointed them back to God.

Of course we need to judge and assess people’s attitudes and actions, so that we can avoid accepting things that are wrong. But we must be open to people who might seem lost, people who have made something of a mess of their lives. Perhaps even through us, these people might find some encouragement and help that will help them open up to the grace of God.

And as we seek to show love to our neighbour, we must remember that our neighbour could be anyone at all: someone like us, or someone very different. We need to encourage one another to be welcoming people, rather than judgemental people. Part of that is crossing denominational lines as we do here, although it of course goes a lot further than that.

Our prodigal God forgives us at incredible cost. May we remain open to that love, and reflect it in our lives and in our attitudes to others. Amen.

Paul Weaver