

I was watching a comedian – always having to reinvent his material – compared to musician – people listen again and again.

Is this true for us when we hear this parable?

Nothing new? Or is Hearing this parable can be like hearing from a longtime friend. Strong memories rush in, and we are eager to resume conversation with a familiar voice.

The danger in this is making assumptions, becoming too familiar – can we today discover newness. If we think we already know what the parable is about, or think that it only means a couple of things, then we close ourselves off to its depth.

The setting of Luke 15 is one of lostness – NB Lk 15:1 – tax collectors and ‘sinners’ vs the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees – both groups were ‘lost’ but in different ways

### **Lost Things in Luke 15**

So Jesus tells three parables. Each involves recovery or reclamation followed by celebration. The first two (15:4-10) declare that finding a lost thing legitimately results in rejoicing. They also equate finding and recovery with *repentance*, an idea that was central in last Sunday's Gospel reading.

By contrast, Jesus' third parable, in 15:11-32, does not include the word *repentance* or any. It offers a different answer to the scribes and Pharisees, for the three parables do not simply repeat the same point. The three parables' characters evidence a variety, for the third moves away from society's more invisible members (shepherds and women) and takes us inside a privileged family.

### **That's Odd**

Jesus' parables typically include moments of odd behaviour. These details seize attention through their strangeness and illustrate the alterity of the kingdom of God. That is, they depict God's ways as alien to our usual expectations and to conventional wisdom. The only response in this story which is predictable (?I think – I'm not sure, being an only child!) is the response of the older brother.

Notice the odd aspects of the interactions between the father and his younger son:

\**The son affronts his father.* His request for his part of the inheritance is out of line, perhaps the equivalent of wishing his father were dead. The son could have expected a share of the family estate, a much smaller piece than that due to the elder son, but only upon his father's death. Nothing compels the father to grant the request.<sup>1</sup>

\**The father appears recklessly indulgent.* Because the son's request would bring such shame to the household, granting it makes the father appear foolhardy, not generous.

\**The father appears recklessly credulous.* Dignified men in Jesus' culture would not run like this man does. Clearly the father longs for the son's return, for he sees him "while he was still far off." But by welcoming him as he does, greeting him before hearing a word, the father appears ripe for exploitation. He does not wait for his son to express contrition (only a brief confession) before restoring him to full status in the household, symbolized by the robe, ring, and sandals.

Is this what grace looks like? Is God's grace a grace so eager to give and restore? Will not those who value responsibility and propriety consider it dangerously permissive? Is this cheap grace – do we really not need sackcloth and ashes – the sort of repentance we've come here today to mark on this Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent?

**Does** the younger son earnestly repent, or is he a manipulative scoundrel?

Some argue that the son's repentance is implied, even if it is not clearly named by the ambiguous expression *he came to himself* (verse 17). After all, he hits rock bottom, longing to eat what unclean animals eat, once he is done in by a trio of calamities: "dissolute living" that squanders his resources, a

"severe famine," and a social neglect in which "no one gave him anything." As signs of contrition, he confesses sin and plans to ask his father to welcome him home as a slave instead of a son. As signs of sincerity, he rehearses his speech and begins to deliver it even after his father embraces and kisses him. On the other hand, "he came to himself" can indicate that he came to his senses and got clarity on his situation (see Acts 12:11). The absence of repentance language is striking, particularly since the previous two parables condition readers to expect it. The son's rehearsed speech smacks of insincerity and a plan designed to tug at his gullible father's heartstrings. Perhaps Jesus' point is that even scoundrels are joyfully welcomed in God's household. Just pointing oneself toward home is what unleashes God's welcome. Any motive will do.

However we judge the younger son's motives, still the story retains a deeply scandalous flavor in the father's exuberant response to his returned son. The father welcomes home a loser, as a loser, and restores him to his standing as a son. Coming home at rock bottom was all he had to do.

*Second*, is the elder son correct?

The elder son makes the parable especially complex and interesting. He surprises us by breaking the pattern set by the two parables in 15:4-10. One sheep was lost while ninety-nine stayed together. A woman searched for a coin while holding onto nine. But both sons in this family are lost, including the one who never left home.

As soon as the elder appears in 15:25 we sense his alienation. No one bothered to call him in to join the party! Accordingly, he does not enter the house. He does not address his father as "Father" and speaks to him about "this son of yours" instead of "my brother." His refusal to celebrate stems from his deep resentment.

Why is he resentful? He is taken for granted. No extravagance celebrates his reliable service. He accuses his father of showing preferential treatment. He expresses this with the visceral intensity that such unfairness can generate within family systems. The elder son forces us both to digest just how scandalous are the father's actions and to ask what this son's reactions say to us.

This son cannot see the situation in any way but according to his own conventions of justice and through the torments of the lack of appreciation he suffers. The father's response to the younger son utterly confound the rules, doctrines, and convictions that confine the elder son.

Is the elder son correct? By his own reckoning, he surely is. And many of us need to be brought to the realization that, deep down, we tend to reckon things in similar ways, according to similar standards of fairness and belonging. How can we not?

Let's not fall into a trap when they write off the elder son as different, an outsider, or especially reprobate and self-righteous. He is the consummate religious insider, for he understands and articulates *the scandal* of God's grace better than any theologian.

The father does not cast the elder son away. The parable denies a zero-sum economics that would have one child accepted and another rejected.

For the father calls the elder son "son" and confirms his full place and favoured standing within the family. All that remains to be seen is how this son will respond.

### **A Parable for Feasting**

Henri Nouwen, in his excellent book (recommended for lent!) the return of the prodigal, asks us to see this story as if we were all 3 characters- the prodigal, the elder brother, and the father who forgives.

\*Both sons, each in his own way, misunderstand the workings of grace. The younger seeks to bargain or manipulate, while the elder cannot let go of sacred canons and grudges. Yet both are welcomed home, regardless. They call us to reassess our own standards and the basis of our relationship to God. Can we see ourselves as the younger son – can we, in this service, see how we might have reached rock bottom and realise our only response is to come to our senses and return to the Father?

\*The elder son crystallizes questions about who has the rights to enjoy benefits as a member of God's family. Who rightly belongs to this family? Who gets to determine the benefits? Who in God's family remain objects of our disdain? Can we see ourselves as the elder brother, taking our Father's love for granted – using our church membership and good standing as a front which means we don't get any closer to the Father's great love for us?

\* The Father is forgiving and loving, exuberant in his response, note, to both of his sons – he doesn't exclude – can we see ourselves as this father – developing during Lent a love for all, excluding none – welcoming back those who have offended us, with open arms, even if they are only just beginning their journey back?

My prayer is that as we begin this season of Lent, these words of Jesus about lostness will speak to our hearts – to see ourselves as the father see us, to turn back to him, and to welcome all with his overwhelming love.

Prayer/reflection