

Luke 15 v1-2 11 -32 – The Prodigal Son

The parable is the longest in the Bible – over 500 words long and the most quoted. It has preoccupied and perplexed the thoughts and works of countless religious and secular scholars, writers, and even artists.

Why? It doesn't seem so complex. The meaning doesn't seem so obscure on the face of it. The domestic scene it describes may even be familiar to many people. The return to the fold of a beloved family member who has wandered off for a while. His family greets him with conflicting emotions.

Some feel joy at his return; some feel relief that he is safe; some feel jealousy that all seems forgiven and even forgotten; some harshly judge his profligate ways; some feel it is unfair that they are not celebrated for staying and remaining faithful to their family obligations.

But as you can expect, the real message of this parable isn't quite so simple. It doesn't lie so obviously on the surface of the story. We realize that the eldest son's error was in judging his brother's return and his father's reaction of pure joy – no reproaches, no recriminations for the trouble or grief the son's appearance had caused – “from a human point of view.” Who among us hasn't and wouldn't take that same “human point of view” when confronted with a similar situation that seems so obviously unfair?

Somehow the Prodigal Son's return to his father's favour seems just too easy: essentially, “Hi, Dad. I'm Home!” And all is forgiven. Let's have a party! It is hard for us to accept that the consequences for behaving badly could be, should be, so apparently light.

-Even though we understand that the return to the faithful flock of any one strayed sheep, [even just one formerly lost soul,] is always the occasion for joy in the family of God.

-Even though we understand that the call to “repent and return” is one that we all should heed in small ways, as well as in life-changing ways.

We understand that a forgiving nature is one which we are called to cultivate in a life of faith and to demonstrate in our relationships with others. But somehow we can't help but feel that the situation described in this parable smacks of what we might call “cheap grace.” It conflicts with our definitely all-too-human notion that we need to earn good fortune, and certainly in some measure deserve God's favour, and that “no pain, no gain” is the proper yardstick for measuring out someone's portion of forgiveness.

Understanding God's justice is never easy. Basically, the difficulty lies in the fact that we confuse our sense of justice with God's capacity for love.

In human and secular understanding, the two have become entangled – and muddled. Justice has to do with fairness; love has to do with selflessness.

Justice is balanced; love is extravagant.

Justice almost always involves some measure of retribution; love calls us to reconciliation.

The deeper truth of the story of the Prodigal Son lies in coming to grips with the breadth and depth of God's love.

In the words of the hymn, it requires us to contemplate the “wideness of God’s mercy,” to imagine it from outside and beyond the narrow confines of the human perspective. It is not for us to decide who falls within God’s grace – nor who should be excluded from his mercy.

During this time of Lent, when we are meant to prepare ourselves spiritually for reliving the story of Jesus’ passion, his death and resurrection, we need to keep Paul’s words clearly in focus – that through Jesus’ act of self-sacrificing love, “God was reconciling the world to himself.”

There is no universal accounting of trespasses, no meting out of more salvation to some than to others.

There is no greater redemption for one group than for another, no fuller restoration of a chosen few over the vast hordes of sinners. God was reconciling the whole world to himself.

That isn’t justice; that is unfathomable divine mercy and unbounded holy love.

Paul tells us that we have been entrusted with spreading the message of this kind of absolute reconciliation – the message of reconciliation that lies at the heart of the story of the Return of the Prodigal Son.

And the kind of reconciliation that we are called to preach is the kind of reconciliation that does not weigh our merits, but simply pardons our offences, It’s the kind of reconciliation that holds nothing back, harbours no recriminations, nurtures no resentments. The kind of reconciliation that demands nothing in return – nothing except utter surrender to God’s mercy.

We are called to preach the kind of reconciliation that comes from unconditional forgiveness, like the father gave in his immediate welcoming and loving embrace of his errant son:

“Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.