
The Prodigal Son
March 14th 2010

I remember a few years back I was co-leading course with a man at another parish and I would set up the coffee ready and have all my notes in order, make sure the place was warm and unlock all the doors – *and* set up all the chairs. And this chap would come in right on the hour and then teach about half the course but he wasn't really prepared and then as soon as the course was over off he'd go and I had to put everything to bed and lock up the church and stack all the chairs.

And the thing that drove me crazy was that everybody thought he was great – everyone just love him and he got the credit for making the course a big success. And what drove me crazy was feeling that way because I knew it wasn't about approval but about serving God – and yet I kept slipping into this sort of competition for approval.

Well, I think all of us can rather relate to this story because I think all of us have been in the position where we have not felt been given our fair share or have received the respect and the appreciation that we deserve.

Perhaps that is the appeal to the gospel today. In the gospel we have that famous story the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This is the story that Jesus tells of two brothers and how the younger one tells his father to give him half of the family estate and that he goes out and travels to a land far away, a foreign country and there he spends all of his money on wild living.

You know how younger brothers are.

We are told that in time the money runs out and his fair-weather friends desert him and that he becomes so hungry that he takes a job looking after pigs which for a Jew is a ceremonially unclean thing to have to do - and is so hungry he fights them for the food that the pigs eat. Finally, near starving, the boy realizes that even his Father's slaves are better off than he is so he prepares

a speech in which we hear how he is going to ask to be treated as a servant and is not worthy to be a son anymore.

When he comes home the father runs down the road to meet him. He puts a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet and a robe around his shoulders and orders that the whole house have a party and they kill the fatted calf and everyone is happy – right?

Well, *no* – who isn't happy that the son has come home again? (I mean, apart from the fatted calf) – of course, it's the elder brother. We are told that he is coming home from the field – probably working all day long like the responsible elder child he is and he hears the sounds of partying. The servant fills him in that his younger brother has come home and he's safe and sound and his father is so happy about this that he's fired up the BBQ and the party is in full swing.

And the elder brother is angry -and why not? After all, he has been the good son, he has put in his time looking after the estate doing the family farm putting in long hours and his brother gets the red carpet treatment.

And the Father comes to him begging him to come in and join the party – he has to go outside because his son won't even come into the house – and the son says “Look! After all I've done I've never disobeyed you I've worked like a slave and you have not even given me a little party – and my good for nothing brother comes home and you have a party for him!

And the Father says My son, you are always here with me and all that I have is yours – but we had to celebrate because your brother who was dead is now alive – he was lost and not is found”.

And that's where the story ends. We have to wonder at this sort of love.

In the story, Jesus' audience would have been shocked by what the younger son has done – he has asked for his inheritance while his father was still alive – it was an unspeakable insult a bit like saying “I wish you were dead”. He has dishonoured the family

and wasted the inheritance on wild living. Can we really blame the elder brother? I mean, don't you feel that he's done the right thing and that he is getting the short end of the stick?

We are confused by the Father's response it doesn't make sense, it doesn't add up after all, he was insulted by his son and treated as good as dead it doesn't make sense - but then again, love doesn't make sense. The parable shows us something of the love of God - a love that isn't rational that is excessive is lavish and - and here's the point we stumble on - a love that doesn't have to be earned.

The Father says to the elder son "You are always with me and all that I have is yours" - in other words you've had my love all along.

The wonderful Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen in his amazing book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* suggests something radical - as he sees the story there is not one prodigal son but two - he sees the elder son as equally as lost while he is physically at home with his father he doesn't understand the father's love.

Like so many children who compete for their parent's attention and love the elder son feels that he must somehow earn his father's love, his father's recognition and his father's approval. He tries to earn it by being the good son by keeping the rules and by being better than his good for nothing brother.

What he doesn't realize is that he is trying to earn something that he already has - and he doesn't know it. The elder son does not understand that his father already loves him - and loves him extravagantly.

We are left in the parable with him at the doorstep and we don't know if he will go inside and be embraced by the love that is within - or if he will stay outside, angry and judgmental and just as lost as his brother once was.

The parable is a reminder to us that we are already loved - simply because God's love is irrational and extravagant. This is not a parable that condones the Prodigal's behaviour but a parable that

celebrates the love of God the Father. It is a story that asks if we can accept that God loves us as equally as everyone else - good or bad or somewhere in between and come into the house – or if we are going to stand outside angry and sullen and think we deserve better.