

## **THE PRODIGAL SON** (Lindfield 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019)

### **LUKE 15: 11-32**

If this famous story of The Prodigal Son were told in the form of a Greek Moralistic Fable such as those written by Aesop, The Prodigal Son would probably have been portrayed as a young man that went from being a User to a Loser. He played cruelly on his father's affections, claimed his share of the inheritance and blew it all away on a binge, ending up feeding pigs. That's where the story would have ended. Serves him right. The classic morality tale. But Jesus tells it very differently.

Whether he was winning or losing. Whether he was working with his father and brother or living it up in some other town, the only thing that is constant in the whole story is that he was the Beloved. He was born and raised in love. He abused it and strayed from it. He squandered it and returned broken and sorrowful; begging at best for some miserable scrap of mercy. But that's not what he found. He walked right back into unbounded love....not a grudging acceptance or a plea bargain, not even tough love with lots of strings attached. His father ran to meet him, embraced him, rejoiced with him and forgave him.

In these few familiar lines in Luke, Jesus explains the nature of God and our relationship with Him. God is the wellspring of love. And we are His beloved. He loves each one of us in all our falls and resurrections. He loves us in the brothel and in the pig sty. He rejoices when we turn to Him whether in exaltation or in desperation.

How many times have we acted out this story in our own lives? If not on this scale but in many little ways. How many times have we turned away from God, to do it on our own only to realise we can't and come back – repentant and sorrowful? We can undertake this project. We can put this plan into action and re-vitalise the Church. We can follow this book and raise our children. We can adopt these lifestyle principles and live a successful life. If I get this job then I'll be secure. If I make sure I've achieved this and this and this then I'll be popular and seen as a Leader. How many time have we thought the grass was greener on the other side of the fence only to discover it was artificial and not real at all? OR how many times have we resented being faithful, doing the right thing? Plodding along when others seem to be succeeding far more than us? Our neighbour couldn't care less about God but his life seems so much better, easier than mine. The Church next door is so much bigger than ours but we are doing all the right things, why aren't we growing? This of course is Older Brother thinking. His jealousy and resentment of the lavish treatment given to his younger sibling just angers him and when the story ends, he hasn't gone into the party. Did he? Did he eventually accept the younger brother? Did the Jews eventually accept Jesus as Messiah – some did. Did the Jewish Christians accept the Gentile Christians? Yes but it was a difficult road.

We can play more than one character in this story. And we do. The main point of the story is that when we do come back we know what we can expect: unconditional love, boundless joy, divine mercy.

In the frequent telling of this story, emphasis has rightly concentrated on the repentance of the Prodigal and the forgiveness of the Father. More contemporary reflections also explore

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Christ's intimate understanding of human nature in what he tells us about the first-born faithful son.

To all appearances the Prodigal Son and the first-born are two distinct individuals, But real life is often more complicated than that. As I said a moment ago we can play out more than one character in our lives – depending on circumstances. There is another way we can be both Prodigal and Older Brother. How seamlessly can we flip from asking for forgiveness for ourselves to denying forgiveness for others? So there is a double lesson we can learn from this parable. We are not only loved, but we are meant to love. We are not only forgiven, we are meant to forgive.

Obviously there are no conditions to unconditional love, but that does not make it one-dimensional. Neither is it one-directional. It is always there for the asking. But when we fully embrace it, we get a special grace that tells us we must share it. We must pass it along. We return it with praise and honour to the Author of Love. To whom much is given, much is expected. That is what it means to be The Beloved, AMEN

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