

St. Mary's Sermons

Luke 15:11-24

Back to church Sunday

I'm so pleased that this compelling parable has been chosen as our theme for today's back to church service. I never tire of talking on this timeless story. It is perhaps the greatest story ever told by the world's greatest story teller. It encompasses so many foundational truths that lie at the very heart of the Christian message. Not only that but I firmly believe that this parable has much to say that is highly relevant for our society today.

The parable tells the story of the younger of two sons who decides to ask for his share of the family fortune; the only problem is his father is still alive. It's really hard for us to understand what a total stab in the back this was for the father to take. Amazingly the father agrees to his son's request, incidentally in just the same as God our heavenly father sometimes gives us what we want in order to expose what we really need. As soon as this son gets his hands on the money he heads off to a foreign country and begins to party, big time. Eventually the inevitable happens and he runs out of money, worse still this is at a time of severe economic recession in the country in which he is now living, so the only job he can find is feeding pigs. It is at this point that the lad finally hits rock bottom and decides that there is only one thing that he can do and that is to eat humble pie and return home to his dad say sorry and hope against hope that his dad might take him on as a servant.

However, it soon becomes clear that he need not have worried. As the silhouette of his emancipated boy appears on the horizon the father does something truly extraordinary. Verse 20 tells us that while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him, he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Lets then examine the significance of each of the five things that the father did.

Firstly we are told that the dad saw the son, which can only mean that he must have been looking for him, waiting and longing, might I suggest praying, for his son to come home. Once again this week we got a glimpse into the heart ache that parents feel when there children are missing when the 15 year old Sussex girl run away with her teacher. Someone once remarked that it is a good job it was not the elder brother who saw his brother coming home first or else the outcome probably would have been totally different.

Secondly we are told that the father had compassion on the son. This was no outward show of shallow sentimental feelings. The word used conveys the idea that the father was deeply moved. This is truly amazing when you would have naturally expected that the father, with some justification, to have been deeply angry at his son's rebellious behaviour.

Thirdly Jesus tells us that the father runs towards his son. The idea here is that the father does not just jog towards him but runs to him as if he is competing to win a gold medal at the Olympics. It would appear that his motivation is to get to his son before the other villages did. No doubt they would have known about how this son had treated his father and how he had brought shame upon his whole family and they probably would have insulted him or perhaps done something even worse to him.

In order to be able to run to his son the father would have had to lift up his robe and this would have revealed his undergarments, something that men in that cultural context simply would not have done. Our Bishop in Chichester was a good sport. He came to our holiday club, I'm a sinner get me out of here and Di got him to do a bush tucker trail. He took his cassock off and a little boy shouted out, "I can see your pants". This bishop said, "No these are my shorts, here's me pants!" It is clear that this father is not bothered about his own honour; his primary concern was to protect his son.

Fourthly we are told that the father embraces his son. I think this means that he gave him a great big bear hug. Now we need to remember that this boy has been looking after pigs. Let's not beat about the bush here, he must have really stunk! I'm sure you would agree with me that pigs don't smell very nice at all and remember this is in a hot climate! I'm not sure that in his current state I would have been so quick to give him a hug. Not only that in the eyes of the Jews pigs are unclean animals and by hugging his son the father would also have become unclean. In his book 'I am your father', my friend Mark Stibbe writes, "Yet the father does not care. He doesn't worry about revealing his

undergarments and he doesn't care about his son's unclean state. He engages in a beautiful and spontaneous act of paternal affection".

And finally the father kisses his son. The verb Jesus uses has the sense of continuous and fervent action. In other words he doesn't just kiss him only once. So the father does five things but notice he does not say a single word! I'm sure that if it had been me that the very first thing that I would have done would be to give him a piece of my mind, "Where on earth have you been? We've been really worried, you can't imagine what you have put your mum and me through, just look at the state of you!" Reacting in that way would only compound the guilt that the son is already feeling.

The younger son now tries to embark on his carefully rehearsed speech. But the father will have none of it. The father who up and till this point hasn't spoken now speaks to his servant. He tells them to fetch the special robe which was reserved for visiting VIP's. The servants with no doubt confused and surprised looks on there faces, run back to the house and fetch the robe as there master had instructed them. They only have a servant master relationship with him while the boy on the other hand enjoys a father son relationship.

The father now places this robe over his weary and bedraggled son completely covering him so that no one can see the filthy clothes anymore. This was a clear sign that the father had completely pardoned his son, no strings attached.

As if all this was not enough the son must have been even more amazed at what happened next. The father instructs the servant to place a ring on his finger. This would not have been an ordinary ring but the family signet ring. It was a sign that he has been reinstated.

The father's act of returning the ring is just as special as the giving of the robe. If the robe said you are forgiven then the ring said you are family. The boy is now fully reinstated and to emphasise this, the father also gives him a pair of shoes. The NIV describes these as sandals. But I think for once the translators

have got it wrong. Sandals were worn by slaves, free men wore leather shoes. I think Mark sums all this up very nicely when he says, "Once again we have a very public, symbolic gesture within this particular cultural context. The robe says you are forgiven. The ring says you are family. The shoes say you're free."

Finally the father holds an extravagant party in honour of his son. A calf is cooked; enough to feed approximately two hundred people. Not only was the whole of the father's family but the whole of the village must have been invited. Every time someone comes back to God we are told there is great rejoicing in heaven, this is why I chose the song come on and celebrate.

I'm sure that I don't need to remind you that the father in the story represents God while we are the prodigal. This truly is the picture of a perfect father. Even those of us who have been blessed to have good earthly father only have a tiny insight from that into the superlative nature of God our heavenly fathers love for us. While those of us have not been so blessed with good earthly fathers cannot begin to imagine what it is to know that sort of love.

I am sure we all know this in theory but not all of us have allowed this truth to really, really sink in. We truly have nothing to fear from our heavenly father. He wants all of us to know that we do not need to feel guilty anymore. He wants us to know that we have been adopted into his family.

Absolutely nothing we have done can make God love us any less, nor can anything we do make him love us any more. Knowing this truth will radically transform our lives it will set us free to be the people that God wants us to be.

Over the course of the next few weeks we will be exploring different aspects of God the fathers love for us, we will see how not only has he dealt with all our sin he has also dealt with our shame.