



Which Elder Brother?

Luke 15:11-32

This is one of the most instantly recognisable stories in the Bible – the story of the prodigal son – the lost son. A story that is familiar in any generation – a son who thinks that the grass is greener on the other side and off he goes and spends his inheritance having a good time – until the money runs out.

ONE FATHER, TWO SONS

But actually the real focus of the story is actually the father – the loving parent – who cared about both his sons as we find out. Many parents who find themselves in the situation of having a son or daughter who go off never keeping in contact – invariably feel a sense of loss and anxiety about their child. **MISSING** There's a programme called Missing on daytime TV from time to time about people who have gone missing and their loved ones just want to find them. There are appeals from the people's families for them to come home.

This is the case here. We read how the father saw the returning son from afar off – he must have looked out for him regularly and accepts him home with great joy. Such is a parent's love.

By any measure, the father had a right to be annoyed. Here was the lad – demanding his share of the inheritance before his father had even died! He had no right to demand it while his father was alive. In fact, people in those days, just as people today just looked down on greedy people who ripped off their parents in the way that this guy did.

But here was the lad – uncaring, headstrong, wanting his own way, thinking he knew better. We'll we've all seen it and been it. You know some teenagers – they always want to assert themselves.

Who should be Prime Minister after Gordon Brown? Well I'd suggest putting a teenager in charge of the country – it would be good to have someone in charge whilst they still know it all!

TEENAGERS

The father gave the young man his head and his inheritance. As a younger son under their law, he was entitled a proportion of his father's land as an inheritance – the eldest got bulk of the land. It could have been a third of the estate – a huge sum when he cashed it.

It gets worse, the kid learned his lesson the stupid way – he blew the lot and ended up in just about the worse place for a Jewish lad – as a slopper out on a pork farm!

PIG FARM

And as he contemplated eating the pig food he knew that going back to his home village, facing the disapproval of people, the possible wrath of his father who he figured disowned him when he took the cash and ran and then having to beg his dad for a job on his farm, was far better than slopping around with the pigs.

How he underestimated a parent's love – he was welcomed back And rather than dad feeling

embarrassed by him, he invites the neighbourhood to come in and rejoice that the son he thought he's lost has returned.

WELCOME MAT

The message is one of the clearest in the parables of Jesus – the heavenly Father welcomes people with open arms – with joy, with enthusiasm when they turn back to Him. As this is Advent time, we remember again a God who loved the world so much that He sent His own Son to be born and to die for us so that if by faith we turn to Him and trust Him and follow Him, He readily and joyfully accepts us. Wonderful isn't it.

But actually it isn't *just* a story about those who have never trusted Christ coming to Him – it's the return of people who have trusted Him, who have followed Him or who were interested in Him. Whereas the definition of the English word prodigal describes wasteful extravagance, it's become associated with people who leave home to do their own thing.

This story is about every parent's nightmare – one of their children coming off the rails – and this one came off big-time – he even went and *demand*ed his cut of his father's inheritance and when he gets it, he emigrates and the proceeds to spend the cash on whatever thing he likes. What a tragedy for the father – he probably knew exactly what sort of mess the son was going to get into. How do I know that? Because he loved his son so much that he always kept a look out for his return.

We could apply the picture of the wayward second son to the whole of the human race, but there is an immediate and more obvious application – to those who have experience of being in the Father's family but for whatever reason have upped sticks and done their own thing. And we have them associated with our own church – people who once ran well with God, or who came regularly, but now we see little of and they don't worship elsewhere either. We reckon in the last decade or so, we have had about 40 people who fall into this category. Some visit us on special occasions and will do so in the next few weeks. Many are relatives of those who worship regularly.

Let's get back to the pigsty. PIG CARTOON

This guy got himself into a mess and his solution to the pigsty and he realised he needed to do something – he came to his senses – things were better back at home even for the lowliest servants. But there was still an ulterior motive. He wanted to come back to the father in his own way with his own plan even if it meant grovelling and becoming a servant.

I think we are all realistic enough to know that people we have been praying for, our prodigals, don't have the primary motive of seeking God this Christmas, however many things they may come to. There are many reasons why people get into the spirit of Christmas and most of them won't be Christian as we would recognise them.

So what made the young man realise he was accepted back into the family? It was the Father's enthusiastic expression of love. He realised he was loved by the father.

WELCOME MAT

No guesses as to the parallel here. How do people come to Christ? When they have a living encounter with the living God.

The father was overjoyed and threw a party and everybody was happy. No not everybody. There were two people put out. Two you say? I didn't read two. Oh yes you did.

Q – Who was the most upset when the Prodigal Son came home? A – The Prize Calf!

I'm just joking of course. In human terms, the elder son was totally annoyed that this slimy brother of his should get such a welcome after having the cheek to take his cash before dad died and what's dad doing now.

Look at the words: *“The elder brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! 30 But this son of yours wasted all your*

property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!

“IT’S NOT FAIR!”

Hey, this son’s just as bad. He’s accusing his father of all sorts of things. Didn’t he realise how the father felt about his lost son? Obviously not. “Your son” wasted the money. But the father reminded him of his true position – he still had everything to look forward to.

It’s wonderful when prodigals return to Christ. Heaven rejoices. The Father embraces his son or daughter. But often the elder brother doesn’t like it. And who’s he. He’s those people who have faithfully continued to worship and serve God through thick and thin throughout the years. They’re the people that know that God accepts people on the basis of *“your sins and iniquities I will remember no more”* but make sure that returnees never forget their weaknesses. They are the people that resent newcomers in church because they have different ways – ways we are not accustomed to.

Jim Rice says this *“The elder son, unappealing as he may be, has many descendants that are found in church and in the larger society. They are steadfast and leading members and citizens who have no patience for those who squander time and money, they have little sympathy for those out of work or just down and out, they are quick to judge and label those of differing backgrounds, ethnicities, or various persuasions as sinners and those outside the bounds of their beliefs or of being decent folks.*

So the challenge I give you this – am I an elder brother like this bloke? Am I going to see people coming back to Christ or coming to Him for the first time and say to God “do You really have to save him or her? Don’t you know what He’s done? Don’t you know what she’s like?” Yes He does and that’s why Jesus died. The problem is that we forget.

Someone called the Jolly Blogger says this: *We tend to think that, because we serve God faithfully, God owes us a blessing. We are not supposed to have reversals of health or wealth or happy relationships or things like that. So, when we get angry at God over this or that, we reveal that we are elder brothers – our service to Him has been “slaving” all along whose intention was to obligate God to give us more of his stuff (health, wealth and happiness) than it was to have fellowship with him.*

If you’ve been a Christian for years without ever missing a step – rejoice that God has been gracious to you – you’ve walked with Him. Now also rejoice because He’s restoring that opportunity to others and giving it for the first time as well.

The story ends in a reversal. The wayward younger son ends up on the inside partying and the self-righteous elder son sulks outside. And the Father remains the one full of grace.

Now look at the title – it says “Which Elder Brother”. Just a minute, there’s only one elder brother in the story – where do I get two from. Let me refer you to scripture:

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

Hebrews 2:10-11

Jesus is our elder brother. he’s not like chummie in the story. He not only loves seeing people coming back to God, he came and died to open the way for that to happen. God doesn’t want us to be like the guy in the story but like the other elder brother – Jesus. He was the one that went to the cross to make sure they returned. He made the extra effort. He walked the extra mile. He suffered so that men and women could find forgiveness, return to the Father, have eternal life..

And God calls us to be like that. I believe God wants us to welcome our prodigals back. It may take a while, but most of all it means that we have to make the changes, take the risks, roll out the red carpet. That’s the challenge for us a church this advent time.

*As we come to communion this morning, let’s make the following song our prayer as we ask God to heal our land, which means also to heal our relationships and move forward in Jesus.

Send Revival, Start with me – Matt Redman.

There were two scriptures in that. The first one was Jesus' statement of intent we heard about last week. If we are His people, we do all these things. Luke 4:18-19

And as our elder brother and followers of Him we do that. And as Jesus' pleasure is to do the Father's will so we see that our Father wants none that have strayed to be lost. So Lord, send revival, start with us. Use us, change us, challenge us but most of all give us that imperative to love those who are returning to You to encourage them and rejoice with them as He rejoices in their return.

Amen

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