

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Fourth Sunday in Lent Yr C 6 March 2016

Joshua 5.2-12 Psalm 32 2 Corinthians 5.16-21 Luke 15.11-32

When Jesus started to tell a story about a father and his sons he'd have got people's attention straightaway. Some of the foundational stories in Israel's history began with a man and two sons.

Genesis, the first book in the Hebrew Scriptures has three stories of fathers and sons.

- Adam, with Cain and Abel - a tale of envy and murder
- Isaac, with Esau and Jacob – a tale of trickery and deceit
- Jacob, with Joseph and his brothers – a tale of betrayal and lies.

Everything in Jesus' culture favoured the oldest son in a family. Yet, in those Genesis stories it is the younger son who turns out to be the one through whom God does what God intends. And this, despite the younger sons' scheming, betrayal and downright wrongdoing in the stories! The inheritance, the birthright and father's blessing, which should rightly rest with the older son, came to the younger, time and time again.

In Jesus' story the younger son came to his father and asked for his share of his father's wealth (the word actually means *being or life*). It's a foolish request! And the father complies! It's a betrayal of the older brother who is working out in the fields, not scheming in the house. The father agrees! His wealth is divided and half given to the young man. After not many days, but not immediately, the young son goes to a distant land. He squanders his money, though there is no hint of sexual immorality. It's the older brother who uses that as a jibe later!

When all the money is gone, and there is famine in that land, the younger son takes a job feeding pigs just to survive. He is hungry. Very hungry. But the food he gives to the pigs has no nourishment for humans. He could be entitled to a share a slaughtered pig, but he cannot eat pork. There is no hope left except in going home to work as a hired servant in his father's house. And its hunger that brings to his senses.

I wonder how often the younger brother thought about his older brother. I suspect he thought his life was dull and boring. There was a kind of security in it, but it lacked the insight and hard-won wisdom the younger son was gaining. It also lacked, it seems the ability to celebrate and enjoy himself. The older brother was driven by duty. It seems he was just too 'good' and serious to party. Destitute, but wiser, the younger sons sets off for home.

Before he can arrive the father sees the son far off. He has been waiting, hoping, expecting, it seems, the son's return. Now, instead of waiting sternly in the house for the son to slink in, he rushes to meet him in public. The whole village is either watching this or will hear about it – it's a scandal. He has the best robe in the house – probably his own – put on the son, and a ring on his finger and he restores the son to his place in the household.

Jesus has not yet finished the story. We haven't heard about the older brother's reaction. Out in the fields, he is a dutiful son, independent, yet still within the father's sphere.

The older son comes in from the fields to find a party underway. He is full of complaint. "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you... yet you have never even given me..." The father tries to comfort the older son. He only now realises the older son is also 'lost' to him. He pleads with this son to come into the house and uses the same Greek word that John's gospel uses of the *Paraclete*, the Holy Spirit. The father comforts, 'all that is mine is yours' and pleads 'this brother of yours was dead, and has come to life; was lost and been found'.

Maybe you feel sorry for the older son. He is loyal and dutiful. He has never been lost to the father and his complaint is that the younger is being shown affection he has never experienced. What the father feels and what the older son experiences don't match up. Perhaps the younger son is the child of a more favoured mother. That certainly happened in the other earlier stories. Joseph was the only child of the more loved of Jacob's two wives, Rachel.

The older son is so focussed on his entitlements and the lack of them being provided, that he cannot see things as his father sees them. He is loved, though he reckons he is not. Can he learn to trust his father's love although he has never tested it? Will he discover that what he longs for, the father's joy at his existence, is already his and has always been on offer?

And what of the father? Isn't he also culpable, letting his son have what he could not yet handle? Now the father is attempting to restore the brothers to one another; to make his family whole; to recover what has been lost.

And finally who would be unmoved by the image of the father rushing out to greet the son?

That is the enduring image of God Jesus leaves us with in this story. The father does not actually favour one son over the other. Each child is loved, and always was. In the end, Jesus implies, our recklessness, our hunger faced up to, may be what *bring us to* God. And it may well be that a *false* sense of our own goodness, and assumed superiority keeps us *from* God. God's love can be found equally through hunger and foolishness acknowledged, or resentment and pride renounced.

“There was a man who had two sons”, Jesus said. He meant, ‘get you ears flapping, here comes a story about God and about us.

A father had two sons

- Cain and Abel – from their story we learn that to kill another is to kill (however we do that – literally or symbolically) a brother or sister. And remember God marked Cain to protect him. Can we maintain our belief in the humanity of those who do what we abhor?
- Isaac and Ishmael, one son rescued from sacrifice, the other expelled from his father's house and today many of their descendants are at war with one another. Yet, the two reconciled to bury their father Abraham. If those two brothers reconciled, can their children yet do the same today?
- Jacob and Esau – one stole the other's birthright and blessing, the other vowed murder in revenge. Yet after Jacob was wounded in his deep wrestling with God and he then encountered his bother Esau, the two reconciled.

A father had two sons, a family had stolen children, a church had lost members, and rejected members... the stories in the scriptures ought to give us hope for our reconciliations, from the personal to the global.

Finding the lost whether they are sheep, coins or people takes work. God is always about that work. It also requires our efforts to recover the lost and the straying – in ourselves, in our families and communities, in the wider world – for that is the source of wholeness and joy in God's household.