

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Fourth Sunday in Lent Yr C 10 March 2013

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. 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.

Now, in those days everything in the culture and the religion 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 those 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, come to the younger, time and time again.

So one day, Jesus tells a story in which God – for the father is a figure of God- shows love and acceptance towards a younger son. Now, as good and conventional people see these things, this young man behaves as a 'a waste of space'. When that younger son came to his father and asked for his share of his father's wealth (the word actually means being) it amounted, in his culture, to saying 'give me now what I will get later; I am going to live as if you were already dead.'

Shocking! It's an outrageous request! 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. Off goes the young son to a distant land. He becomes the playboy of the eastern world – 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, 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 would be entitled to 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.

I wonder how often the younger brother thought about his older brother. I suspect he thought his life was dull and boring, which it was, to be honest. 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 celebration and joy. The older brother was driven by duty. It seems he was just too 'good' and serious to party. Destitute, but wiser, the younger man sets off for home.

Before he can arrive the father rushes out to meet him. Once again this father's behaviour is shocking! He has already broken with culture in giving away his wealth.¹ Now, instead of waiting sternly in the house for the son to slink in, he throws dignity out the window and rushes to meet

¹ Interestingly, the Greek word used for 'what is yours' means 'being' not wealth. The son is asking for a share of the 'substance' of the father.

him in public. The whole village is either watching this or will hear about it – it's a scandal. Loss of honour, and the shame that follows, and errors of judgement, just pile up in this story. And, don't forget, the father is a figure of God. Could it be worse! Not much, as good and conventional people understand these things.

Now, 'the great and the good' the Pharisees and scribes listening to the story think this Jesus is like that younger son. Everyone says he welcomes sinners to dine with him. He gives parties and women come along! He throws a dinner and lets the ritually unclean eat at his table! No wonder he tells a story like this. It looks like self-justification.

But Jesus has not yet finished the story. The older brother's reaction is not yet told. Out in the fields, he is a dutiful son, independent, yet still within the father's sphere. It's while he is out in the fields doing his duty, that his father has betrayed him twice, as he sees it, not just in giving way to his greedy brother but in receiving him back with gifts to honour him. 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...."

So who do you connect with in the story? Do you see yourself in the younger son? The younger son learns 'the hard way' about himself, and about love and acceptance. This younger son has learnt the truth about himself and his appalling demand on his father's love. He is changed by his experience. He has grown beyond the false innocence of ignorance about life. He will never again take his life or his place within human community for granted. The father gave him life, and when he was ready to appreciate what a profound gift real love is, the father gave him new life: acceptance and welcome. The younger son has learnt what grace is. He has discovered gratitude as the only way to live. His life is deeply healed. In truth, his life is redeemed.

Maybe you feel sorry for the older son. He is loyal and dutiful. He has done nothing wrong. Despite all that, his father does not seem to favour him. Most people say they identify with him. They feel angry at his unfair treatment. Yet, he 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. I wonder what the older brother would be like if his life could be healed of his jealousy and resentment and his lack of gratitude. 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 just a bit culpable, letting his son have what he could not yet handle? Don't we sometimes want to hold God responsible for giving us the freedom to choose between what is harmful and what is helpful? Our human freedom, which we do not always use well, leads us to destruction and evil and death. We so often want to hold God accountable before we accept our responsibility for how we behave.

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 son is loved, and always was. In the end, Jesus implies, our

recklessness 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 foolishness acknowledged, or resentment renounced.

“There was a man who had two sons”, Jesus said. He meant, ‘get you ears flapping, here comes a story about God.’ Are you ready for this, Jesus wants to know, for here is a tale of God who acts with the foolishness of unconditional love, sharing God's own being with us. Here is God offering us compassionate acceptance when we are ready to ask, when we have come to ourselves and our human condition and realised we are not God but need God.

Do you know this God, Jesus asks? Yes? No? Jesus tells us that there is *NO* God other than the patient, loving, compassionate and utterly, utterly hospitable parent of this story. No God to be manipulated, or cajoled. Or used to threaten others; no God needing to be manipulated into rushing towards us to love us – the only God there is, is already waiting to do so.

It is into the embrace of this God that Benjamin will be baptised today– as have we all. So, my baptised sisters and brothers this God, the God of Jesus Christ, is the one holding *you*, *holding us all* in loving embrace? Is that not a cause to celebrate and live life in the Spirit to the full.