

Luke 15:11-32 – The Father

We are told that Jesus did most of his teaching by telling stories and parables, so to expand on his mission statement "The kingdom of God is near" he would say...

The Kingdom of God is like a fabulous pearl or
The Kingdom of God is a like a mustard seed.

When he told longer stories, like the one we have today it's a fairly logical assumption that the Father in the story is God the Father although not everyone interprets it that way.

As we look a little closer let's examine that proposition.
IF the Father in the story is God, what do we make of His behaviour? To say the least we could say he seems an unwise Father.

Two things to say as we explore the text; the culture of Jesus day was based around shame and honour. Shame was to be avoided at all costs. To bring shame on your family was a dreadful thing. Like the wedding at Cana and they nearly ran out of wine bringing terrible shame on the family and the couple (until Jesus stepped in).

The second thing; in Jewish law the inheritance between two sons would be split with 2/3rds going to the eldest and 1/3rd to the youngest, it wasn't a 50/50 situation.

Next week Jane Ward-Hall is going to be speaking about the younger son, the week after Revd Terry on the older brother so I am not commenting on them today, but clearly the request of the younger son is obnoxious and certainly shameful.

As far as the younger son is concerned his Father is nothing more than the source of wealth and he can't wait for him to be dead.

As parents, Katherine and I have become the bank of Mum and Dad on quite a few occasions recently but to my certain knowledge I don't think any of our children want us dead.

The story goes on (v12) *the Father, divided his property between them*. What? This shameful request was met by shamefully accepting it!!

So the older brother suddenly receives his 2/3rds, the younger brother gets his 1/3rd and off he goes) and the Father? Well, what is his role now? He's acting as if he were dead. He's given it all away.

So is this Father, God or not?

The traditional interpretation is that God the Father, out of love, gives us our freedom. I go along with that and yet giving in to a shameful request does make me start to question the story. Which is why Jesus told stories. Should a Father behave recklessly?

Can I suggest, Guy and Lauren, that when Theo is 13 and asks can he have the car keys to go for a spin you ignore the example of the Father in this parable and say no. And then ground him for a month. Or two.

Was this action loving? Or reckless? In Jesus day, to go along with the request brought shame on the Father, his actions were inappropriate.

The Father shows up next in the memory of the younger son, now fallen on hard times.

The Fathers, day-labourers had more than enough bread. And the younger son seems to think his father might treat him with the

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same generous kindness and hopefully with forgiveness. That reputation sounds like our Father God – generous, forgiving.

So the Son goes home and we discover this Father is watching and waiting.

V 20. "But while he was still a long way 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.

Now that sounds like Father God who is watching and waiting for us to come to our senses and turn to him. What a welcome he gives the boy. What compassion he has for his son.

However, in the culture of shame and honour it would be a shameful thing for this older man to be seen running but he doesn't care and there might be more to it than that.

In his book 'The Cross and the Prodigal' Kenneth Bailey argues that the outrageous, shameful behaviour of the younger son would have brought about rejection by the whole village.

They would perform a ceremony called *Kezazah* which was to break a large pot in front of the boy and declare that he was cut off from his people. The reason the father runs to his son is to get to him first before they did. To clothe him in a robe and give him a ring and sandals publicly demonstrates that he has been received back. The Father behaves shamefully and honours his son!!!

The Father then instructs the servants to kill the fatted calf and start a party (*and here's a strange thing – the Father gave everything away and everything that is left belongs to the older brother...so the Father is giving away the older brothers wealth!*)

A party is started and what a party...this party is LOUD. Paula Gooder, in her book on the parables says that the theme of chapter 15 is all about celebrations and this one is the biggest of them all. It's so loud that the older brother coming in from the fields can hear it going on.

We'll hear more about the older brother from Revd Terry, but in response to his anger and bitterness the Father says

"we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Is the Father in the story supposed to be God the Father?

I remain with the tradition that it is, for this reason.

In Hebrews chapter 1 it says

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being

If we want to know what God the Father is like we look to Jesus and when we do what do we see?

He gave himself away recklessly. He loved the unlovely, he touched the untouchable and made them clean. He was seen with all the wrong people in all the wrong places and brought hope to those who were hopeless.

He endured the shame of the cross, the most shameful and brutal of executions, all for loves sake and while suffering on the cross a neighbouring thief simply said "remember me" and Jesus promised him that "today you will be with me in Paradise". That's outrageous.

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So let's end where we started.

The Kingdom of heaven is near. What is it like?

It's like a family who ask God to bless their son, not because they have earned the right to anything, but because of grace...God's riches at Christ's expense.

It's like a church who speak of the cross being the means of a forgiveness they don't deserve, and find themselves becoming a family.

It's like a building where there is a welcome to all who come, whomever they've come and an embrace that says, you belong.

It's like a song that declares God the Father as a good good Father and we his children are defined by his love and nothing else.

(and this is what we then sang..)

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 10 October 2021