

## The Prodigal Son. – Luke 15v11-32

<sup>11</sup> Jesus went on to say, “There was once a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to him, ‘Father, give me my share of the property now.’ So the man divided his property between his two sons. <sup>13</sup> After a few days the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. <sup>14</sup> He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. <sup>15</sup> So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. <sup>16</sup> He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. <sup>17</sup> At last he came to his senses and said, ‘All my father’s hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against God and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.”’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and started back to his father.

“He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with compassion, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> ‘Father,’ the son said, ‘I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father called to his servants. ‘Hurry!’ he said. ‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ And so the feasting began.

### Lost?

Think of the things that you lost. What was the hardest to lose?

When I was little, I lost a pet tortoise was really upsetting. As a student I had a 12 string Yamaha guitar which I loved, and gave it to my long standing girlfriend thinking we would be together forever. We weren’t and she kept the guitar – it’s still in her loft!

Relationships though can be much harder to lose than possessions. I am losing my relationship with my Father. Its been happening now for 5 years. It is not because either of us love each other any less, but he is ill and is losing his memory. Whilst he still recognises me, we can’t laugh and chat about the things we used to. I am slowly and painfully losing him. It hurts to lose some-one you love. The important relationship between Father and Son, or Father and daughter, was one that Jesus valued immensely. He spent much time in prayer, talking to his Father in heaven building that relationship. For us too, the positive or negative impact that the relationship that our earthly Father can have on us is immense

One day a crowd gathers around Jesus and he tells them a parable that some literary critics have heralded as the best short story ever told. This was about a Father and two sons, both in their own ways were lost, but today we are going to concentrate on the youngest son, who we call the Prodigal son.

### An outrageous request

The Father in the story, has land, livestock, servants, and he may have been a nobleman. He had these two sons whom he loved dearly, but the trouble was that neither of them loved him. In fact, the youngest wished his Father was dead, and tells him so. “I want my inheritance now”. It was normal for the oldest son to have a double portion, so the younger son wanted his third share. It was a shocking thing to ask your Father to divide his inheritance whilst he was still alive and healthy. In those days it meant the same as saying ‘ I can’t wait until you die, I wish that day was now, because I want to have my inheritance straight away’. The relationship between them must have broken down really badly for the son to behave like this. The culture would expect the Father to explode with anger at this request, and discipline the boy severely for the cruel implications of his demands.

So the property is divided between them. However neither son, has the right to dispose of the property whilst the Father is still alive. After signing over possession of his property to his sons, he still has the right to live off the proceeds whilst he is alive. They can work the land, and make money, but they **cannot** sell the property, and they must make sure the Fathers needs are met.

Yet this is still not enough for the younger son, and he wants not only possession of his inheritance, but disposition rights, which he is not entitled too. It was normally a lengthy process to sell a field, and would normally take many months. Yet, the son could not wait. He needed a quick sale, within a community that would be outraged at his behaviour and reluctant to be a part of it, unless of course the price was low

enough to make it impossible to turn down. The message is clear, Dad I want you dead, and I want what's yours, and I want it now. The son was indeed lost to his Father.

Imagine you are married, in your forties, and have two sons living at home, a 16 year old and 18 year old, in a lovely house with a big garden, worth over £300,000. One day your younger insists that you sell the house, and down-size to a terraced house so you can give him a £100,000. But he can't wait for you to get a good deal, you have to put the house on with the estate agents at a low price and get a quick sale. What would you say to him? Would you be calm or angry? I don't know any parent that would agree to that. It is far too outrageous.

But the Father in the story agrees that the youngest son can have the right of disposition. So after the inheritance had been divided, it was only a few days before the younger son had sold and disposed of his share, and no doubt at a price below what it was worth. He then took all his money and left his Father and eldest brother.

The stories of Jesus often shock the listener, and surprisingly in this story there is no anger and refusal, but a Father who goes along with the outrageous demand. The listeners will have difficulty relating to the Father figure in this story from the off-set. Who could behave like that and agree to such a demand?

And yet the Father knew that even though his son was at home, he was already lost to him. The one small chance he had of getting a loving son back, was to let him go, even though it was at great price to the Father, both material cost and emotional hurt.

### **Reckless living**

The younger son travelled to the far country. There was a town which was 200 miles to the North of Jerusalem, Syrian Antioch, a good fortnight's travel by donkey. Interestingly, it was where the first Christian Church amongst non-Jews was established, and where Paul and Barnabus helped out. This was the 'Sin City' of the ancient world, where you could party away all your money. It would have been the 'stag party' and 'hen do' destination of choice if such things had insisted then. This was most likely the unnamed place in everyone's mind as Jesus unfolded the story.

The young man had pockets stuffed full of money, and was off to have a good time. The routine and hard work of farm life would now be a thing of the past. With his pockets full of money, the young man was saying "you can no longer tell me what to do, I am going to do my own thing". So he sets off for the far country, to the bright lights, to live the 'good life'. The love of his Father, was rejected, and put far from his mind.

He reached the city, but Jesus says that the young man was wasteful and reckless with the handling of his money, and much sooner than he expected, the money was all gone. Every last coin. No doubt, he had been generous to others when he had money, and could now rely on their generosity, at least to give him some well-paid work, so he can build up his wealth again. But no. This might have been true in a time of plenty, but a terrible famine came on that land, with devastating effect on everyone. There had been a series of famines in and around Jerusalem during the previous few decades, so this would have been a strong image to the listener. The priority was now to survive and feed your family, not to give out favours to a new acquaintance, even if you have benefited from his generosity in the past. A famine would be particularly hard on a lone Jew in a foreign country without family or friends. He would be very vulnerable.

### **Pig food**

The young man, fixated his survival hopes on one citizen of that country, one with property, and glues himself to him. Of those that owed the son favours, perhaps this was the only one that he knew who would find it very difficult to refuse him help.

Anyone who has a source of food in a time of famine will have a string of people wanting to find favour and provision. The polite way some-one from the Middle East, gets rid of unwanted hangers-on is to assign him a task he knows that person will refuse. But to the amazement of the listener, the young Jewish man is

assigned and accepts the job as a pig-herder. Jews hate pigs. In taking such a job, he would cut himself off from the local Jewish community and any charity that they might perhaps have found towards him.

His job was to lead the pigs to where their snouts could reach into shrubs for the prickly wild carob pod. Without other food, the young man longed to satisfy his stomach from these pods just like the pigs did. He may have tried eating them himself, but the wild carobs, though edible by humans, were bitter and had no nutritional value. He could not survive on carob pods. Perhaps the citizen did offer him some meat from the pigs when they were slaughtered, but then as a Jew, even when this hungry, he could not bring himself to eat pork! So with no other food given him, and too little nutrition from the pig food, he began to starve.

When I was in town recently I noticed a trodden cigarette stub, in the grime, on the pavement, and a dishevelled man reached down and picked it up, reshaped it and put it between his lips to smoke the little tobacco left in it. He then went on to the public toilets and found chewing gum on a toilet seat which he put in his mouth. Actually only the first bits true, - but that is the level of shocking behaviour that the listeners would have felt for a fellow Jew working and eating with Pigs.

### **Realisation and a recovery plan**

He was truly lost, and he could easily starve to death if he stayed there. But at what point had he really become lost? When he had lost his money, or even before that? He actually became lost when through his own choices, and selfishness he fell out of a loving relationship with his Father.

At this low point in his life the young man comes to his senses, and to a realisation of the wrong he had done. He had treated his Father terribly, and lost all his money, to Gentiles. His Jewish community would have seen this as an outrage. He had also done wrong by God in not respecting his Father.

A man of his father's standing would probably have had bonded slaves that were part of his estate, and in some ways they were like part of the family, but also some hired workers.. He started comparing himself to these lowest ranking people on his Father's estate and realised how much better off they were than him. The hired men were free men, who would have held the same social status at their employee, but ones who had no permanence on the estate. They would be brought in to pick up work at the estates busiest times, then laid off when no longer needed. However they were free men, and could save up their wages.

He could go home, but if he returned he not only had to face the wrath of his Father, but also his brother, and the community of villagers that he came from. Land owners like his Father, lived in the village in community, they did not live in isolation on their land. If he returned he would have to re-join his village.

He has a plan though, he will confess he has done wrong to his Father, and acknowledge he has no right to be still treated as a son (after the way he has behaved), but present himself as good raw material, from which his Father could mould a useful hired worker.

Everything left of the estate has been signed over to his brother. From the profits, his Father can feed himself and whoever he chooses, but what is left is added to the value of the estate. So by being a hired worker, and not part of the family, he would not have to be eating his brother's bread and reducing the value of his brother's inheritance so any reconciliation with his brother would not be needed.

His final issue is his relationship with his home villagers. It is always difficult for an emigrant to return unless he has been successful, which he is not. The manner in which he left would have offended his whole community, i.e. by taking and selling his inheritance whilst his Father was still alive, then losing this money to Gentiles. If he had returned a rich man and spent money on refurbishing the synagogue it would be different. However he was penniless. His entry back into the village would be ruthless towards him and humiliating, but he would have to face this. The alternative was to stay in the far country and starve to death.

### **Forgiveness**

When we mess up, when our lives spiral out of control as so many do, what we are looking for is help and forgiveness. In those days you could not be forgiven unless you earned it. You had to show remorse, show that you had changed your ways, and done everything you can to practically put right the wrong you had caused. Then after a while if this was evident to all then you could be forgiven.

The prodigal did feel bad about what he done, and he did want to make amends.

He planned this speech, “Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers” This would show his remorse, and by offering himself as a hired worker he could make some payments from his wages back to his Father. If he weathered the storm of abuse that he would get from his village, worked hard enough and pay back his Father what he could, then he might expect eventually that he could earn his forgiveness and be accepted back into the community.

### **First on the scene**

Many young people seeking a better life in a wealthier country know how hard it is to emigrate and come back having failed. When I was at University, we had 3 large tower blocks for accommodation, and we sometimes heard of a student throwing himself off the top. It was always a foreign student that was doing badly in his studies and could not face the humiliation of returning home a failure.

In Jesus’s time, if you leave your village under a cloud of controversy and leave a wake of outrage, you had better be highly successful when you return. To have lost your family estate, to Gentiles and come back dishevelled and penniless would mean certain trouble. On being spotted at the edge of the village, word would get out, and a mob would form, to verbally mock, taunt and abuse the prodigal, and possibly bring physical harm to him.

The Father knew his younger son well, and had fully **expected** his son to fail and to become penniless. He also knew how the village would treat his son if he returned. It had been a long time, but the Father had never given hope of his son returning. He would not let a mob form to greet him should he return and had patiently watched for him every day.

**V20 “He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with compassion, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him.**

The son had made his plans on how he would show his repentance, but the Father had also made his plans for the hopeful return, and his plan was a series of dramatic actions, calculated to protect the boy from the hostility of the village, and to restore him to fellowship within the community.

His first dramatic action was that on seeing him, even though a long way off, the Father ran to the son. Jewish men did not run anywhere, especially an oriental nobleman with flowing robes. It was seen as undignified and embarrassing to do so. Aristotle said ‘Great men, never run in public’. By running the Father would have drawn attention to himself and he would now be the one facing humiliation as he protected his son from it. He would get to the edge of the village before anyone else and would usher the boy back into the community himself with pride not shame.

### **Met with love and forgiveness**

The boy is looking down practising his lines, ‘.. and against God, and I am no longer um fit to um’. Then he looks up and sees his father running towards him. He flings his arms around the young man and kissed him. I love you, I love you , I love you.

Whilst the son was braced for a hostile reception, after all he had done wrong, he was instead met with this overwhelming love.

The kiss is a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. If there is a serious quarrel between men in the village and they were reconciled, then there would be a public ceremony in which there was a kiss between the

men involved. The repeated kissing of the Father to the son, would have been seen as both masculine and culturally acceptable. The Prodigal speaks out his confession..

**V21 'Father,' the son said, 'I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.'**

We see the stark contrast between his leaving speech and his arrival speech. He leaves by saying, 'Father – give me my share of property', which as good as means he wants his Father to die. When he returns ' he says Father I have sinned against God and you', as he recognises and confesses the enormity of what he did wrong. After the first speech he gets all of his inheritance and cuts all his ties with his family. On arrival, he makes it clear that he understands the consequences and says 'I am no longer fit to be called your son'.

*Yet he stops there, and does not ask to become a hired worker, as he had earlier planned. He is so utterly overwhelmed with the love shown by his Father, he realises that this is not about the money that he lost to Gentiles, not about how he had messed up in a foreign country, but it was all about the relationship that he had lost, the one with his Father. There was nothing he could do pay that back, like he could have done to some small extent with the money. He can offer nothing. The restoration of the relationship could only be a pure gift from the Father. To suggest that he could do something to heal that relationship by working for him would be a further insult. All he could do was to accept the love and forgiveness so freely offered.*

### **The gifts (Robe, ring, shoes and fatted calf).**

The servants seeing their Master running would have followed him out to the edge of the village, where this beggar-like image had come into view, and they see that it is the younger son. They will not know how as servants to now treat this son, until they have word from the Father. Perhaps they no longer need to respect him or do anything for him.

**V22 'Hurry!' he said. 'Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet.**

The best robe is most certainly the Father's own robe, which he wore on feast days and other grand occasions. In his mind the Father is already planning a banquet and the robe would give him a place of honour, and assure his acceptance by the community. The signet ring on his finger will symbolise that he is trusted in a remarkable way. By getting servants to place sandals on his feet, it demonstrates that the servants must accept him back as their master. He is welcomed back as a family member.

**V23 Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast!**

The Father wants to publically celebrate the return of his Son. By ordering the fatted calf to be killed for the banquet and not a sheep or a goat, meant that the Father wanted enough meat to be able to invite the community too, not just his family. The meat would not keep, and the fatted calf would feed a 100 people. The banquet and sacrifice of this special animal is what the Father would do only for a highly honoured and special guest. The joy of the son's homecoming was so great to the Father that it must be celebrated with the grandest banquet imaginable. In doing so, he desires to bring his son back into relationship with himself, his family and the whole community.

**v24 For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.' And so the feasting began.**

### **Receiving Grace**

The son, starving and desperate, realises how wrong he has been, and returns home planning to confess and compensate his Father best he can, he will do what he can to earn his forgiveness. Yet on his return, the Father shows an unexplainable depth of love for his son, even humiliating himself in the process. This grace, despite what the Father had been through, was overwhelming for the prodigal who realises he is being accepted back as a son despite everything he had done wrong. All he has to do is **accept the love and grace** on offer from his Father. There is nothing else he can do.

Jesus is redefining the path back to God. It no longer includes making good the wrong you have done, and earning forgiveness. It joins together, 'confession to God' and accepting 'Grace from God' as enough to be forgiven, but also enough to be given the place of a beloved Son or daughter.

## **How we get lost and how we get found**

Sometimes we hear of a celebrity we liked who seemed to have everything, then commits suicide. The papers tell us of the reasons with a life style that spiralled them down into depression and despair. We are shocked and confused by the news.

But that is often the way of selfishness. The Prodigal rebels against his Father, he wants independence, and self-focussed wants everything he can get his hands on. He makes wrong decisions and is wasteful. Then soon he has lost his wealth, his peace, and his identity and he becomes trapped in a desperate situation. Even in this situation he may have convinced himself that this was temporary and would get better. He is lost.

This pattern is repeated in many people's lives, included many Christians, who think they know how to run their lives better than God. They know best how to deal with their time, their talents, their relationships and their finances. Eventually they got lost, even if they don't know they are lost.

However just as there are steps to being lost, there are steps to being found. As Gods spirit pursues the Prodigal, there is a moment where he comes to his senses. A moment of truth or enlightenment hits him. There is a realisation that he is lost, that he has been very wrong, and is followed by genuine remorse and confession. Then he gets up and returns to his Father, who accepts him with open arms. He is found.

## **Where are you?**

So where are you today? Are you lost? If you have spent much of your life focussed on yourself and your own ambitions and wealth generation, without letting God in, then chances are, you are already lost perhaps without knowing it.

The younger son had dreams, big dreams. He thought he knew what was best for himself. He wanted exotic friends in faraway place, he wanted wealth and excitement. His own plans had no place for the steady provision of a loving Father. He went on the run, chasing after the dream. There are many people today who are running after a dream, but running from their true selves, and running from God.

The day that American president JF Kennedy was shot, he was going to make a speech, and in that speech he was going to quote from John 8 – what would profit a man if he gained the whole world and lost his own soul. You are an eternal soul, your body may die, but you soul cannot die. It will live forever either with God or separated from him. Is your soul with God now, or separated from him.? Is Jesus, living by his Spirit, in your heart or not. You may have wandered far from God, or you may have been living in and around Church all your life, but still not be connected in to Him. No matter what other great things you may have achieved or bought, if you do not have Jesus in your life, then you cannot rest in the **assurance** of eternal life.

Even when lost from God, you still are created by God and have his mark on you. He wants to find what has been lost to Him. You are valuable to God, even in your lost state. He loves you and wants you back. You may not feel valuable, in fact you may have gone so far from God, that right now you feel worthless. That is because you can only see what you have currently made of your own life or the bad things that have happened to you. You cannot see what God has created you to become, and the possibilities of what you can still become with his help.

The whole of God is after you. God the Father plans for you to be restored. God the Son (which is Jesus Christ ) died on the cross so that you could be saved from all the wrong you have done. Gods Spirit ( Holy Spirit ) applies to your life what Jesus has done by opening up your mind to how much God loves you, then prompting you into repentance to say sorry for the wrong you have done, so that you can then accept the Fathers love and be saved.

Jesus said that he had come to seek and save what was lost (Luke 19v10). Is that you today?

No matter what we have done or where we have been, we can never sink so low that are beyond the love of God. As Paul declares **there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord** (Romans 8v39).

## **What Love**

The Father **had** always loved his sons and always would. It was a love that desperately wanted a close relationship with his sons, but a love that would allow them their own 'free will' to follow through with their personal decisions whatever the cost was to the Father. Even if a son wished him dead, it would not change the depth of his love for that son.

The younger son was already lost to his Father before he left, and then got even more lost in a far-away land. But at his lowest point, his defences came down enough for him to realise that he **was** lost and should return to his Father, confess and face his anger. But instead he returned only to be embraced by an unexplainable love that had always been there for him, but he had been so wrapped up with his own selfishness that he had never realised and accepted this love before.

It's a love that made no sense to the listeners of the first parable. It is so unique and powerful that it doesn't really make any sense to us either, because it is like nothing we have ever known.

## **What type of love is this?**

A love that was **patient**, day in day out, waiting and hoping for his son to return.

It was a **watchful** love, scanning the horizon, seeking out any signs of his lost son.

It was a **persistent** love, one that never gave up on his sons, whether they were close or far away.

It was a **transforming** love. It was a love that transformed the young man's heart, and broke the chains of rebellion in him.

## **What type of love is this?**

His love is sincere and merciful. It's unconditional.

His love is sympathetic and its sustaining.

His love is powerful and all sufficient

His love is limitless and enduring

It is unparalleled and unprecedented

His love, is an everyday kind of love. Every moment you are in it.

Oh I wish I could describe the love that God has for you...

but his love **is** indescribable, it **is** incomprehensible.

His love is unimaginable and incomparable,

there has never been any love like it.

**This is the love that your Father God has for you, and this love has a name. Its name is Jesus.**

There is no need to be afraid, because this love drives out fear from you. This love can free you from anything that has been restricting and binding you, bringing you down. It is a love that can break any chain.

There is no chain this love cannot break. This love will help you forgive yourself and forgive others who have hurt you.

### **Time to decide**

If you are lost, and God is whispering to you today, then it is time to make a decision. He is a loving God, and he is also merciful.

Yes -There **is** a day coming when God will judge the world, but that is not today.

There is nothing you can do today to earn or make up for what you have done wrong.

But he is not waiting to find fault with you, to judge you and condemn you. No

Today is a day of grace and salvation. Grace means something you don't deserve. Salvation means that you can be saved and restored.

Today God is offering to freely forgive you for all that you have done wrong.

Today God is offering you a new peace, a new joy, a new direction and a new meaning in your life.

God is not just offering you the best of this world, but he offers you heaven too.

Not because you deserve any of it; you don't. It is because of what Jesus Christ did in dying for you on the cross, that has earned this for you.

Are you feeling lost? God is pursuing you and always has been. Let him find you. Let his whisper reach into your mind. Know that he is God. Tell him of the things you have done wrong, and ask him to forgive you. Understand that Jesus spilt his blood and died for you, so that you could feel at home in the presence of a loving Father God. No matter how near or far you have been from God, no matter what mess you have made of your life, you can accept this incredible free gift of Gods love and forgiveness.

Take up your place as one of Gods children, with all the riches of heaven as your inheritance both for this world and the next.

So ask Jesus today to come in to your life, accept his grace and mercy, and let him set you free, free to love and serve him as part of his family. He wants his lost son back. He wants his lost daughter back. Come home to your Father today.

Amen.