

## **Sermon on Luke 15, 11-32: *The heart of the matter***

**Jane Sautter, St. Augustine's, Wiesbaden, 31 March 2019**

Have you ever felt fed up with your family? Just a little? Probably most of us have, at one time or another. One child - who was clearly fed up with her parents - left this note: "By the time you find this I might be leaving. If you want to see me again, I will be at the first McDonald's that you see when you go right from our house. I love you."

The Gospel reading we heard today is probably the best-known story Jesus ever told. It has been called "the gospel within the gospel", or in other words "the good news in a nutshell". If that's so, what's Jesus's main message?

The story in Luke 15 is usually referred to as "the parable of the prodigal son." Others have given the parable the title "The story of the two lost sons". This suggests that actually both the younger AND the older son have lost their way and distanced themselves from their father and their home. The younger one does this by literally putting miles and miles between himself and home. But the older one is actually an equally "lost cause": he does all the right things, stays home and fulfils everybody's expectations, but inside he is full of disappointment, anger and self-righteousness. He feels short-changed by his father. - At the beginning and at the end of the story we can see clearly: There is a distance between each of the sons and their father.

Have you ever felt this way about God? Maybe, if you're honest, God seems miles away from your life. Maybe you were brought up in church, heard all the Jesus stories, but then you decided that the whole church-thing was not really for you. Wasn't life supposed to be much more fun and exciting than what you saw around you in church? You may be wondering what on earth brought to church this morning. - Or maybe you never actually left church, in fact you've been faithful in your service, you have given much of your time and money to a place like St. Augustine's. You've tried your best to live a Christian life. But somehow if you are honest, God hasn't quite kept his side of the bargain: No one around you may know it, but inside you are deeply disappointed with God. Why has your life turned out to be so difficult? Your job situation, your marriage, your child – they are just not what you'd wished and prayed they'd be. God hasn't given you what you hoped for.

Some of us make a conscious decision to put miles and miles between ourselves and God. Others just drift away inwardly, and no one looking at their life from the outside would know it.

Distance from God. If someone says to me "I don't believe in God", a reply I find helpful is "Tell me what the God is like that you don't believe in. Maybe I don't believe in him either."

It's time for a reality check. That is what I want to focus on from this morning's Gospel reading. When Jesus speaks about God, what's the heart of the matter?

Jesus tells us in John's Gospel: Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father. Jesus is the visible face, the audible voice of God in this world. Out of all the stories Jesus told, I am convinced: If you've ever wondered what God is really like, there is no better place to come than the story Luke re-tells in chapter 15, verses 11-32.

The Father in the story represents God. The story is set in the deeply patriarchal society of first-century Palestine. As in any society, there were clear rules for how members were supposed to behave: fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, etc. The first thing to notice in this story is that the Father behaves nothing like a patriarchal father was supposed to behave. This theme runs right through the depiction of the Father in this parable. To take one example: The younger son asks for his share of his father's wealth. Theologian Kenneth Bailey - who lived for many decades in the Middle East - has argued that a likely response of a father would have been refusal and punishment for such an impudent request. Not this father, though. The father divides the wealth among his sons - and lets the younger one go.

Now come with me – if you will – to the very heart of this story. I believe that if this story gives you the essence of the Gospel, there is one sentence which captures the essence of the essence, as it were.

The sentence I want us to look at is in verse 20. I doubt it is a coincidence that this sentence stands right bang in the middle of the parable. In the New Revised Standard Version from which the reading came today the sentence sounds like this: "But while he [the younger son who is trying to return home] – But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."

Walk with me through this sentence in 4 steps, if you will. The first thing to notice is that although the son is some way away, the Father sees that he is returning. In fact, the Greek version of the text stresses that the son was a great distance away, when the father notices him on his way back. The fact that the father sees him even though he is far, far away may be a coincidence. Or it may be that the father has been deliberately keeping an eye out for the son he has not seen for a long time. Why would he do that? We do that when we miss someone, don't we? We are on the lookout for them, we keep our phone by our bed even at night, we leave the light on for them.

I'd like us to take a second step, and look at the next part in our verse: "The Father was filled with compassion". The verb that is translated here in Greek comes from the root "ta splanchna" – literally the inward parts – the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys. That is where the ancient Greeks thought our deepest feelings originate. In today's English, the equivalent would be our "heart". So, what we are being told here is that when the Father sees the son far away, he is deeply moved, some would say: he is all churned up inside, his heart leaps. The father feels compassion, pity, mercy for him. Compassion, pity, mercy: It is this mixture of deep emotions that the Greek verb conveys in the case of the Father. Here is a father-figure who is completely in touch with his feelings – some in our culture today would say: here is a father-figure in touch with his feminine side.

Let's move on a third step: Our text says "He ran." The father ran. The verb Luke chooses here is one that the Greeks used for athletes competing in races. So it is clear that the Father is running as hard as he can. And he has a long distance to cover, remember? He saw the son when he was far, far off. - Now, running was something a Middle Eastern patriarch would never do. It was considered undignified. In order to be able to sprint as in the story, the Father would have to hitch his garment up, exposing his legs. This was nothing a respected father-figure would voluntarily do. After all, this father was someone wealthy who had people who could run his errands for him – labourers working for him, slaves and a remaining son at home. But this particular Father decides to run himself. And having run this considerable distance, he presumably arrives panting and sweaty. You get the picture: not a pretty sight. This is what happens when you have missed someone very much and you're

heart is deeply moved because they are on their way back. You just can't wait to see them, can you? And so the last thing you care about is whether you look dignified or are behaving the way people expect you to.

And now on to the fourth step in our verse: "He put his arms around him and kissed him." Literally: "The father fell on the son's neck and kissed him tenderly & affectionately". At last, the Father reaches his son. He is overjoyed that he has him back safe and sound. He does not wait for apologies or explanations. He welcomes him with open arms. He hugs him and kisses him. He shows his feelings of love for this son who – as far as the father was concerned – had not shown any sign of interest, let alone affection for him.

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"But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him". So how can we sum up what we learn about God from this sentence? No matter how far away we are, God comes running towards us. God delights in us. God is generous to us and welcomes us home, no questions asked. That is the heart of the matter, the "gospel in a nutshell".

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And just in case you're wondering whether you have to be a rebel, a "younger son" to get that kind of welcome, let's look at the reaction the older son gets at the end of the story. The older son is the one who represents the religious insiders, the Pharisees we heard about at the beginning of the reading, today we might say: the regular church-goers. In the story, the elder son refuses to join the party, remember, and is standing outside full of anger. This would have counted as very rude behaviour in first century Palestine. Kenneth Bailey points out that the socially appropriate response would have been to send a servant out to fetch the son – and it would have been the father's right, then, to rebuke and criticize the son for his rudeness. None of this happens, though. Instead, in verse 28 it literally says in the Greek: His father came out and invited him again and again – or we could say "his father kept on inviting him". The New Revised Standard version translates this idea as: "His father came out and began to plead with him." And another translation says: "...his father went out and begged him." I want you to notice: The Father goes out to find this son, too. And he begs him, he pleads with him to come in and join the party.

Ernest Hemingway tells a story about a Spanish father. His son has run away to Madrid. The father decides to seek reconciliation with his son. He takes out this ad in a newspaper: "Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa." Now, Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the square at noon on Tuesday, he finds 800 men called Paco waiting for their fathers.

In the Gospel reading for today, there is an invisible question hanging in the air at the end of this story – a story which is left so tantalisingly open-ended, and deliberately so. The father's question hanging in the air is: Will you accept my invitation and join the party?

That is the invitation we are left with today, on this fourth Sunday in Lent. How will you respond, I wonder? I am convinced: God comes looking for us, all our lives, again and again. Every single one of us. Whatever it is that keeps us from God, he wants to build us a bridge. God comes running towards us, eager to reach us. God is full of joy at seeing us again. God does not leave us in the cold, he pleads with us to come in and join the celebration of life with him.

In Lent we are called to look into our hearts and to ask ourselves: How am I responding to God's invitation? What is keeping me back? Whatever it is – be it open rebellion, or a heart turned towards bitterness, despair or self-righteousness – whatever it is that is keeping me from God, am I willing to let it go?

We can be sure: The one who has been looking for us all along is full of joy at our return.

*And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*