

LENT 4C 27-03-2022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Joshua 5.2-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:11-32

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. 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. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Today's Bible readings are about new beginnings. That might not be immediately obvious so bear with me. In the first reading, from the book of Joshua, the people of Israel had finally made it to the promised land after forty years of wandering around in the wilderness. All the adults who followed Moses out of Egypt had died, so it was a new generation preparing to settle in their new land.

To demonstrate their willingness to obey God's law all the males were circumcised- with a flint knife. Ouch.... Then they were ready for their new beginning. God stopped providing them with miraculous food and they ate the produce of the land; they were ready to settle down and start farming, growing their food. They needed to make the change from a nomadic existence to becoming a settled community. It was a new beginning!

The second letter to the Corinthian church declares that Christian believers are a new creation- new people who have been put right with God and are ready to be ambassadors, sharing the Good News of God's love with others. What's past is gone along with guilt and shame; Jesus has dealt with all that so nothing can come between us and the love of God. It is a new beginning!

The parable of the Prodigal Son is the title we give to the story Jesus told that we just heard from Luke's gospel.

'Prodigal' is not a commonly used adjective these days; it can mean wasteful, reckless, extravagant; and it can also mean generous, lavish, or unstinting.

The younger son squandered his inheritance in 'dissolute living'; we can assume he recklessly wasted his money until it was all gone.

His father was also prodigal; he generously gave this son who was lost new clothes and threw him a lavish party. More than that- he gave his son a new beginning.

However, the story doesn't end there, because the older brother comes along and throws a tantrum when he finds out that his worthless, no-good drop-kick brother has turned up- and Dad is throwing him a party! This parable is often seen as a story about repentance: the younger brother repents and his father joyfully welcomes him home. We might see ourselves in the repentant son and see the father as God- our loving, forgiving Father.

That is only part of the story, and perhaps not the point of the parable.

We read in Luke chapter 15. 1-10, the verses just before this story, that the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling about Jesus, saying "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

In response Jesus told them a couple of parables: one about a lost sheep and the joy of the shepherd who finds it, and one about a lost coin and the woman who celebrates when she finds it. He said, "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

So Jesus made it clear that he was all about welcoming 'sinners'- the people that those religious leaders would have nothing to do with- and telling them how to get right with God again. Then he told them the parable we call the Prodigal son.

The elder son's reaction to his brother's return and their father's welcome is the point of the story. Just like him, those scribes and Pharisees could claim to have always been obedient and always worked hard for God; just like him, they were incredulous that a disreputable, disobedient person could be welcomed with open arms and forgiven.

Nowhere in this parable are we told that the younger son repented. He went home, with his rehearsed little speech, because he was hungry and was pretty sure he'd get a good feed at Dad's place.

Big brother could see right through him; he knew his brother was out for whatever he could get. He'd shown that by demanding his inheritance while their father was still alive. He was rotten to the core, and Dad was just naïve.

In describing the father's joy and unconditional acceptance of that son, and his desire to celebrate because he'd come home, Jesus was making an unmissable point to those critical of his association with sinners.

The Good News was then and is still that God loves sinners. Yes, it is good and necessary for us to repent and change our lives; but it is God's amazing grace that enables us to do that. God doesn't wait for us to start being good, obedient sons and daughters; God seeks us out, invites us to come home, and rejoices over us when do.

Those religious leaders shunned people they saw as sinners, believing their holiness would be somehow contaminated if they associated with anyone who didn't or couldn't live up to their standards. Jesus went straight to those sinners, knowing they needed him more than anyone who thought they were already in God's good books.

In our Lenten study this week we've been thinking about how hard it can be to accept and really believe that God loves us. This parable along with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin should reassure us that God really does love each one of us, whatever others think of us and- more importantly- whatever we think of ourselves. That's the amazing grace, that saved a wretch like me- and you.

Today we might find it hard to imagine a religious leader- a priest, pastor, bishop or whatever- refusing to associate with people they see as 'sinners', and criticising those who do.

Our context is different, of course: we are not first-century Jews. But is it really that different when certain clergy refuse to accept that God could call a woman to ordained ministry? Is it any different when people who are gay or differently gendered are not welcome in some church communities?

Sadly, there are religious leaders who preach and teach that some people are not welcome in 'their' churches. What do you think Jesus would say to them?

God's extravagant love and mercy is wider than we can imagine, and in the end our role is not to judge, but rather to celebrate grace and abundant life wherever and whenever we find it.

"But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found!"

The Lord be with you.