

Sermon: 2019/03/31 - Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; & Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

So, for the last few weeks we've been tracing (some of) the progress - the history - of the Jewish people - Jesus' ancestors - the "Hebrews" - beginning with Abraham; and then there was his great-grandson Joseph; and then the exciting escape from slavery in Egypt with Moses, and the "burning bush."

Well, today we hear about their next "step," which was the start of the reconquest of Canaan - the so-called, "Promised Land."
(The *homeland* that they never should've left.)

And the first thing that they had to do was to cross the river Jordan, which was the border; and that was very easy because - just like at the Red Sea - God *divided* the waters.

And the next thing to do was capture a city called, "Jericho."
And the Jews were very excited to do this right-away; *immediately*:
yay, let's fight those pagans!

But God restrained them.
He said - *essentially*: "Hold on, not so fast!"
Wait for a moment in you camp at 'Gilgal'.
Why?
Because you need to *prepare* yourselves before you can receive the wonderful gift I have for you in this place.

And to that end, He - God - said that they had to do something *very* discomfoting.
He said that all the men had to perform a strange ritual on themselves.
They had to "sacrifice" - *lose* - get rid - of a piece of themselves.

[Slice off the top of a banana using a flint "knife."]

And we too need to "lose" something - give away something - of ourselves if we want new life in "The Kingdom" (of Heaven).
We need to *remove* our pride, selfishness, luxuries - and stuff like that.
And this is the point of Lent - and of "discipleship."

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

[Holding up Scripture insert] Is this the most famous parable in the Bible? Some of you may have heard more sermons on this topic than I've had hot dinners! So, what can a young preacher like me add, which won't sound clichéd? Worn? Or "hollow"?

Well, I can't promise anything(!); but, if you will indulge me, I'd like to draw your attention to the moment that the father is reunited with his wayward, younger son in the fields outside the family homestead: this encounter between them - at the edge of the farm - is the crux of the parable; its beating heart - the nucleus of its meaning. So it deserves our scrutiny.

Notice, in particular, the father's reaction. But especially, for now, what he 'said' in response to the boy's confession of wrongdoing, which is - and I quote - '*to his slaves*, "Quick, bring out a robe...a ring, ...sandals... [etcetera, etcetera]..." [v.22] This is significant, this...*deflection*.

Why?

Why does he not speak *back* to the one actually addressing him but to others about whom we were unaware? (Presumably these were labourers nearby.)

Why does he not contradict or "shush" his son?

Why does he not speak some comforting words of reassurance along the lines of "Oh, don't worry about all that. It was no big deal.

I'm glad that you had fun - squandering your inheritance, being promiscuous, gambling and drunkenness.

That stuff is all cool.

Its good you got it out of your 'system.'

Boys will be boys."

Why does the father not placate his son with these sort of sentiments?

Because what his son has said about himself - that he had done shameful things; that he wasn't 'worthy' to have such a generous, forgiving father - these were *true* things.

And the "father" doesn't approve of his son's life-choices and doesn't want to convey any kind of tacit approval.

No!

The father's *passionate*, exuberant, uninhibited "welcome" is for *the person* of the

so-called "Prodigal;" not for his shameful *behaviors*.
Those will remain in that 'distant country' - to be forgotten.

And this is the clear subtext of the parable.
For the moral standards - the expectations of God - as to what is right and wrong, are remarkably stable throughout the Bible.
And nowhere in the New Testament do we hear Jesus overturning those specific commandments that the son has violated.
Quite the opposite, in fact.

And so, bearing that in mind, look closely at the accusation of the pharisees with which our *Luke* reading began - "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Notice that they aren't charging Jesus with encouraging or *endorsing* those 'sinners' (particular) sins;
Jesus isn't criticised for being a "libertine" or a hedonist.
He isn't being criticised for preaching a new, wider, more "accommodating" ethic.
Instead, what makes the religious people unhappy is that - whilst maintaining *in principle* a similar, exacting and commendable moral standard to their own - He yet willingly *fraternised* with people known to be disreputable;
that He was friendly and warm with (the sort of) men and women who were the cause of scandal and gossip in their communities.
This is what makes the pharisees "grumble."
That though He - unequivocally - shared their conservative moral outlook, the Christ did not share their convention of *demeanour*, which was to ignore and deride and sideline such "deplorables."
Rather, He was *glad* to know them and be in their company;
He was ready and able to recognize their (God-reflecting) *humanity*;
their unique *dignity* even beneath some pretty dubious, obvious outward mistakes.

And this is the standard we're set - a tough standard that is hard to actualise ourselves:
of *not* condoning those lifestyles and actions which go 'against Heaven' as revealed to us in the Scriptures, *whilst genuinely* maintaining a loving and sympathetic disposition - whether to the incontinent homeless drunk blocking the sidewalk;
to the prostitute;
to the adolescent single-mum;
to the opioid-addicted;
to the ex-con with the tomato-knife you interrupt emptying the kitchen cupboards;
And everyone else.
Because, *and please "get" this*: Jesus had no choice but to "fraternise" with "deplorables" because all of humanity is.

That's why we *all* need a Savior.

Whether our exterior - a jacket and tie - says: "Respectable, upstanding citizen."
Or our "exterior" is something more "exotic" and questionable.

And the moment we begin to feel contempt for someone else;
the moment we begin to focus intensely on the sin or the disorder of another
person, we begin to lose sight of our own; and when we do that we become the
older brother, standing outside of the party, looking, *enviously*, through the
window at the 'fatted calf' - *but not enjoying it!*

So, instead of "juicy steaks" of close relationship with God - *the "Father"* - we
stand in the spiritual cold, feeding (instead) only our resentment *and*
conceitedness.

And our self-denial about our own "waywardness" deepens, and becomes harder
to see; a barrier to hearing and knowing the truth about ourselves and *our* need for
God and *our* need to get right with Him.

And this is the real issue that Jesus is trying to address with the parable.

That fact is somewhat hidden by the custom of calling this lesson, "The Parable of
the Prodigal Son," which is the title often printed, "helpfully" - in black and white -
by publishers in certain Bible translations; but that the story is offered in response
to the complaint of *the pharisees* indicates - beyond a shadow of a doubt - that
Jesus was addressing *them* - persons who were already, in many ways, doing much
better than those Jesus was "eating" dinner with.

How were the pharisees doing better?

They were "doing better" because they were acutely aware of Heaven's demand of
holiness and took it very seriously.

They *really* believed in the existence of God and their lives *evidenced* this belief -
it significantly shaped their decisions, so much so that they were a visibly
distinctive group in that society.

Hence, the "label" that our gospel writer is able to apply to them - "pharisees."
They stood out in public; they stood out from the "mainstream."

And as such, therefore, were 'ambassadors'.

(Saint Paul's term this morning.)

That is to say, they were unmistakably *self-selected* representatives of God.

As we are, if we've chosen to sit here.

But what kind of "ambassadors" were they being?

What was the message?

Sadly, *seemingly*, it was one of hostility:

it was one of a God who was aloof.

Of a God who was *snarling* at humanity.

Of a God *sneering* at us; turning up His "nose."

Which is why the detail in the parable about the father "running" to the son; about the Father embracing and "kissing" the son is crucial:

Yes, God is a judge.

No, not everything is "fine:"

- Let me reiterate, the silence of the father in the face of his son's rebellion is sadness - a broken heart. But his disappointment is *secondary* to His glee of being reunited with the contrite boy - and this is how God is:

nothing is as important as - to quote from the Epistle - 'reconciling the world to Himself', which will mean 'not counting [our] trespasses against [us]' if we choose to return to Him.

Let's take a moment to reflect.