



Sermon:- 6th March 2016

Who's prodigal?

Today is mothers' day, a celebration of being a mother which can be, at one and the same time, a great blessing and a great trial. We all love our children, but sometimes they go through phases that we find it difficult to like. This blissful scene is not the whole picture, is it! Although I once heard a paediatrician suggest that children were always going through a phase it's just that some of these phases suit us better than others!

One of the most difficult phases to deal with can be the teenage years. Do you know who these people are? Lauren ... Vicki Pollard ... Kevin. They are characters created by three comedians. What do they all have in common? They are all sulky teenagers, each with a catch phrase which sums up the attitude of a difficult teenager.

"Do I look bovvered?"

"Yeah but, no but, yeah but, no but, yeah but no but..."

And perhaps most typically,

"It's not fair!" Stereotypes, yes, caricatures, certainly, but there is an element of truth here. Teenagers can sometimes be difficult.

I wonder if you know who said this: "The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers."

Attributed to Socrates – there is indeed nothing new under the sun, and the young man in today's bible reading strikes me as just another sulky teenager. After all, when you think about it, he was pretty fortunate by the standards of the day. He lived in a good home, his father was well off, yes he had chores to do, but he would be well rewarded one day as his father only had two sons and so half the property would be his.

But he is neither happy nor content. He is fed up with his regulated and narrow life in what he feels is a back water. He has visions of a more thrilling life in the big city. He wants drama; he wants excitement, he wants experience, he wants extravagance!

Extravagance is another word for “prodigal”. The dictionary defines “prodigal” as “wastefully or recklessly extravagant” and he was certainly that.

He gave in to his desires and behaved recklessly. He was heedless of the effects of his desires on the feelings of his father or his brother. His request for his inheritance, half his father’s wealth, was, in that culture at that time, deeply insulting to his father. It was almost as though he was saying, “I wish you were dead!” And how many parents have heard that from their teenagers over the years. This restless younger son was bored and frustrated at home. He wanted more from life and thought he would get it in the big city. There he saw no restrictions, only possibilities; freedom, fulfilment, and probably, in all honesty ... fun! The picture we get of this young lad is of someone who finds his life dreary, monotonous beyond bearing, looking beyond the walls of his home and family, his life as he experiences it in that apparently contained and restraining environment, at a life, although he actually knows nothing of it, which seems full of promise.

And so he does the unthinkable, he asks for his inheritance and sets off in search of adventure.

The dictionary goes on to give another angle on the definition of prodigal. As well as “wastefully or recklessly extravagant” it means “giving or yielding profusely; lavish”. And it struck me that there was a sense in which we could describe the father as prodigal also. He gave into his son’s pleading I am sure, against his instincts, his better judgement. Indeed, probably against his custom and practice. This is not how responsible fathers behaved. He succumbed to his sons beseeching, his demands, ignoring the hurt of this rejection.

And perhaps the older brother could also be described as prodigal. He gave generously of his time, his industry, his faithfulness. The picture we have of this elder brother is of someone with no thought for play, or leisure, or perhaps even himself! He worked and strove and sought to be a good and dutiful son. His responsibilities were many yet he seemed to bear them willingly.

So, to return to the younger son. He has spent his wealth recklessly. Showered his riches on those who called themselves friends. They were welcoming, fun, encouraging ... greedy, grasping ... gone. Now he sits in squalor looking for wisdom; the one thing in all his riches that he lacked.

He sits among the swine and mourns and wonders; how can he be redeemed from this? Will his pride prevent him? Or his fear? Or his shame?

Meanwhile the prodigal father, who gave recklessly of his love, now gives recklessly of his desire for reconciliation. Gives of his time in waiting, in wondering. Not knowing whether he will ever see his son again, nevertheless he watches ceaselessly. He must do; how else would he have spotted his son while he was still far off? He wears his vigil like a hair shirt until his son returns. Whenever that might be! If ... ever that might be.

And still the older brother continues to recklessly pour out his faithfulness, his commitment, his industry, for no immediate reward. Perhaps he asks himself, is virtue really its own reward? Is that enough?

And then the younger son returns, expecting anger, recrimination, wanting only to have a roof over his head and a bed to sleep in, to be met, instead, by love that is unrestrained, undeserved, prodigal. Love offered without stint or reserve. He is welcomed, with no condemnation. He is still a son, despite his actions, his misdeeds and his poor choices. His faults have been their own punishment, and he is forgiven now that he is home.

He knows that he is forgiven, that he is loved, even before his father greets him, because he sees his father running towards him. In this time and in this culture, dignity was all and loss of face was to be avoided at all costs. This father had suffered the indignity of his son wishing him dead. Yet he compounds the indignity of his position by running ... picking up his skirts and running ... to meet his son.

Rembrandt has a beautiful depiction of this welcome home. The son kneeling in contrition and the father's embrace. Henri Nouwen has an insightful reflection on this painting. He points out that the true centre of the painting is the father's hands. All the light in the painting is focussed on these hands. And if you look closely, you will see that the two hands are quite different.

The left hand, touching the son's shoulder, is strong and muscular. It grips the shoulder. The father's right hand is very different. The fingers are close to each other and they have an elegant quality. This hand lies gently on the son's shoulder. There is a caress, consolation and comfort. Perhaps today, being mother's day, we might pick up on Nouwen's interpretation of this as being like the hand of a mother. The father offers forgiveness and reconciliation, and in his mothering, offers comfort and consolation. In the same way, God loves us with a love that is both paternal and maternal. Always ready, always forgiving, always waiting, always consoling, always comforting.

And the older brother? Now he is prodigal in his anger! He returns from the fields to a feast that is prodigal. But not a reward for *his* faithfulness, or *his* industry. It's for that squanderer, that wastrel, and he is incredulous and enraged.

His younger brother is not only forgiven, his return is CELEBRATED!

He might have expected that, if his brother returned at all, he would be invited to slip in the back door, introduced back into society gradually so that the scandal of his leaving might be glossed over and soon forgotten. No. The father rejoices, and throws a great party to welcome the boy home.

So the older brother refuses to enter the house. Refuses to sit and eat with the family. And then we see the measure of the father and the extent of his love for BOTH his sons. He reminds the older brother that he will inherit everything. The younger son's repentance and forgiveness doesn't mean that he will inherit anything. He has had his share, has chosen how to spend it, and there will be no more. The younger brother's reward is forgiveness and a welcome home. The older brother's reward is the inheritance that he was promised.

And this is the heart of the story. *The father loves his sons, the younger, whom he thought lost forever, and the older, who inherits everything. Nothing they do can make him love them less, nothing they do can make him love them more. And so it is with us and God.*

God is prodigal. His love is squandered on the deserving and the undeserving. The responsive and the unresponsive. Those who are part of his family the church, and those who are outside it. He is not partial, his love is equal, although it may be expressed differently for different people in different circumstances. But we do not earn his love by what we do, nor do we forfeit his love by what we do. This is grace, and this is mercy, and this is the gospel that the story of the prodigal son teaches us.

God loves us, prodigally.

And nothing we do can make him love us less.

And nothing we do can make him love us more.

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