

6 March 2016, St Peter & St Paul 08.00, Luke 15:1-3 and 11b-end

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Luke the expert writer, puts the prodigal son as the third of a set of stories about losing and finding. All of the stories emphasise God's joy at finding what has been lost, but the story of the prodigal subtly changes the emphasis. The centre of the first two stories is the action of God. God seeks, God finds, God rejoices and calls others to rejoice. But in the prodigal son, the focus of the story is the response of the two sons. Perhaps it should never have been called the parable of the Prodigal Son, for the son is not the hero. Perhaps it should have been called the parable of the Loving Father, for it tells us more about the father's love than a son's sin. It tells us much about the forgiveness of God.

The father's part in the story, unlike that of the shepherd with the lost sheep and the woman with the lost coin, is quite passive. He stays at home and waits, until the pivotal moment in the story when he throws his dignity to the four winds and runs out to hug his son. The father must have been waiting and watching for the son to come home, for he saw him a long way off. When he came, he forgave him with no recriminations.

Once Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious southerners when they had finally been defeated and had returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected that Lincoln would take dire vengeance, but he answered, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." Just as the father welcomed back the Prodigal Son.

It is the wonder of the love of God that he treats us like that.

But that is not the end of the story. The elder brother arrives and it seems he was actually sorry that his brother had come home. He stands for the self-righteous Pharisees who would rather see a sinner destroyed than saved. Certain things stand out about him.

- His attitude shows that his years of obedience to his father had been years of grim duty not of loving service.
- His attitude is one of utter lack of sympathy. He refers to the prodigal, not as my brother but as your son. He was the kind of self-righteous character who would cheerfully have kicked a man further into the gutter when he was already down.

The problem for him, as for the Pharisees – and perhaps also for us? – is that he cannot believe his father loves him, while at the same time showing such love to one so different from him. Both sons have lessons to learn about the love of the father.

Here we have the active seeking God, who reaches out in Jesus to bring back the lost world. We also have the God who looks at us only with compassion, not wanting to humiliate us or judge us, but only to offer us the chance for a genuinely new relationship.

We also have the amazing truth that God is more merciful in judging than many of us; that the love of God is far broader than the love of man; and that God can forgive when we refuse to forgive. In the face of a love like that we cannot be other than lost in wonder, love and praise. In Jesus name, Amen.