

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! **18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:** 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.' 3 Then Jesus told them this parable:

11.... 'There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them. 13 'Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 **'When he came to his senses,** he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." 20 So he got up and went to his father: **'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him;** he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him. 21 'The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." 22 'But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate. 25 'Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound." 28 'The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" 31 "My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Reconciliation: the prodigals

2 Corinthians 5:16-end; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The first thing you notice about this parable is that the lectionary reading has 3 verses before skipping over 2 other parables. I think Luke wants us to get a clear message from this, so cutting any of it out really doesn't help. It's significant that all three parables come out of a situation where the Pharisees are, as usual, complaining that Jesus is welcoming sinners and tax collectors. The gospels seem to see taxmen as a different species to sinners. They could well be! But the prodigals, or the lost are the focus of God's compassion in all 3 parables. The lost sheep is God leaving the 99 to their own devices and going after the one who needs to be found. The lost coin is about finding the one coin in ten which is lost and celebrating its discovery. All 3 parables are *celebrating what God has done*. In fact the entire mission of God is about our reconciliation to a God we have turned their backs on. Of rescuing the lost. Here's Paul from 2 Corinthians: *if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to [us] the message of reconciliation.*

The second thing should notice here is verse 11:

There was a man who had two sons. This is *not* the parable of the prodigal son, it's about two sons, and even more importantly about their father. Jesus offends his listeners, by having the younger son demand his inheritance from his father. And it's just handed over with no discussion. Then, again with no intervention from the father, he goes off to a far country and blows the whole lot. This might not shock us now, but in Middle Eastern culture this was and still is outrageous behaviour. The standard reaction of the father would at least be rage, or worse, he would beat him, because you only ever got your inheritance on your father's death. So this was the equivalent of wishing his father dead. The fact that he also prevails on him to cash it all in goes completely beyond the pale because it would have caused offence and brought shame onto the whole family.

The theologian Ian Paul says this: *[The] parable suggests that our own acts of rebellion, in which we take from God the life and the blessings he offers, but refuse to acknowledge his authority over our lives, is effectively wishing [God] dead.*

And so the son goes as far down the path into his own self made hell as he can, first spending all the cash, then ending up in the ultimate dead end job (for a Jew anyway) of feeding pigs, and even being so hungry that he wants to eat the pigs' food. We've all gone down similar paths but to different degrees. The point is made that none of us is bulletproof. Here's Ian Paul again:

The turning point in the story is when he 'comes to his senses', literally 'he came to himself' – which... suggests... that sin not only separates us from others, but separates us from our true selves.

And so we come to the turning point in v 18

I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ... So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.

So the son *turns back*, which is all the Father hoped for, but at the same moment the father is *out looking for him* before he's home, *running* towards him. There's no hint of recrimination, only celebration of his return. He was dead and is now alive, he was lost but now he's found.

This is crucial – there's no price to be paid beyond the suffering he's already brought on himself. **There is only celebration.** This is such a powerful picture of what God has done. It sweeps aside the misunderstanding which says we must be punished for our sin. Yes God judges us and finds us wanting. But because of Jesus, we're forgiven.

This brings us to the other son, also actually a lost son, the older brother. We might share his sense of injustice. But again look at what happens: he's out in the field; he's angry, and won't come in. He's very likely worried that his father's spending his inheritance on a feast for his spendthrift brother.

He stayed, he did his duty, he slaved away. You can understand his anger. Unsurprisingly he finds the celebration offensive. But the Father goes out to him too, again he's proactive in seeking reconciliation. Why does Jesus not have him punish the younger brother and reward the older one who's done his duty? Why does he get away with it?

This parable is about **grace**, the unearned and unconditional love of God. In a culture today where everything seems to have a conditional value, it's what Craddock in his commentary calls 'the offence of grace'. The apparent injustice of it goes completely against our desire for the wrongdoer to suffer punishment. It's why some Christians now question the idea of Jesus taking our punishment on the cross. The father in this parable does not require some sort of price to be paid before he can forgive, it's enough for the younger son to be genuinely sorry. None of the older brother's obedience and observance of duty can earn the father's love. Why? because he already loves him! And the *only* cause for celebration is that the younger brother has come to his senses and realised his disastrous mistake. The Pharisees thought they could decide who were the sinners and who were the righteous, and then they excluded the sinners. Their big mistake was not understanding that we are all sinners and have all without exception fallen short.

Much as we might hate the idea, we all belong with the tax collectors and the sinners. So are we all to be excluded?

No.

Don't overlook that God also loved the Pharisees! The only thing we can do to deserve forgiveness, like the younger son, is to say sorry.

Jesus followed His Father's heart – to search out all those who had not yet found a genuine relationship with him, and never to give up until he had.

I believe:

- that we all need to come to our senses,
 - that we all need to find a genuine relationship with God based on our acceptance of his grace and unconditional love for us,
- and I also believe:
- that God's genuine passion is that no one should fail in that search,
 - that he is infinitely patient in waiting for all people to turn to him,
 - and that he anticipates their repentance and runs to embrace them when they finally turn to face Him.

Amen