



Parables of Jesus

The Prodigal Son

26 January 2020

Karin Voth Harman

2 Corinthians 5: 16–21 Luke 15: 1–3, 11b–end

A woman stood in my kitchen one afternoon, arms folded, voice crackling with pain and disappointment. She'd been working for you, or people like you, all morning in her job as a college cleaner and now she was working for me. She and her husband had once known status, had some real wealth in Eastern Europe, but had lost it all in post-communist economic upheavals. They had come to England with two young children, worked extremely long hours, driving lorries, cleaning up after students and vicars, so that their children could have better lives. And suddenly their beautiful daughter, the one for whom they'd scrimped and saved to give riding lessons, in her final year of a university course had taken up with a druggie boyfriend. And the mother had said, "no drugs in my house", so the daughter had walked out, and now lived with this boyfriend ... in a dilapidated caravan on a farm, where she mucked out and exercised horses to scrape a tiny wage, whilst the boy half-heartedly looked for a job. And the mother was adamantine in the face of this loss. The boy would never be permitted in her house. The daughter would not get a penny. Behind her hard ultimatums lay poorly disguised heartbreak.

It's hard to know what to say in the face of such parental despair. "So do you know the Bible story of the prodigal son?" I asked hesitantly. She did. Do you remember the part in the story where the son finally comes home, and the father sees him – from a long way off, it says – and then he makes a beeline for him, running for all he's worth, arms outstretched ready to welcome back his child?

She pulled a very cynical face.

But 6 months later she was all smiles. The daughter had come to her senses, ditched the boyfriend, marched out of the caravan and was actually home. The mother had found a way to welcome her back – and repair the relationship – encouraged, I'd like to think, by our gospel today. The parable of the prodigal son, playing out again, in another family, another millennia, another culture. Chances are you've seen a version of this parable too – well of course you have, if you've been reading the latest stories about our royal family.

Even if your own story, at the moment, isn't quite so dramatic, each of us sitting here tonight can probably locate ourselves somewhere in the parable of the prodigal son. How close are you right now, to your parents, to your children, to your siblings? Who have you lost? Who do you mourn?

Are you more like the younger brother, trying to use everything you've got to win friends and **your** way in the world? Or are you more like the older one – trying to please your elders and do what is expected, do the right thing? Many of us are a conflicted bit of both...

Even if you can't quite see your family in this parable, does it give a sort of sat nav picture of your relationship with God? Where are you in that picture? Perhaps you're a prodigal, either living as if God doesn't exist or feeling that you're definitely going to be punished if he does. Or alternatively, like the elder brother, you're convinced you're pretty close to God, but actually you're getting quite peeved off because being good isn't paying off in the way you expected.

Where are you in this story? And can you like a quilter, stitching together two layers of a blanket, find points where the two levels of reading this story – as a human drama and a spiritual drama – meet in some kind of pattern? **That** I think, is the most interesting question.

In tonight's reading from II Corinthians, St Paul identifies that thing behind the prodigal son story when he contrasts two ways of knowing people and two ways of knowing God: 'Wherfore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more'. This language doesn't exactly trip off the tongue – the New Revised translation makes it a bit clearer: From now on, therefore, we regard no-one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

Changing our point of view seems a precondition to the ministry of reconciliation to which Paul calls us in the rest of this passage.

So often the work of reconciliation begins with each person identifying what they want out of the negotiation. But here St Paul seems to warn us off such a point of view. When Christ is at work there is New Creation, which changes the whole way we look at other people.

From the point of view of Flesh, we essentially look at people asking, 'What can I get from you?' The prodigal son story cuts through the layers of pretence and takes what is the norm in most of our relationships to the extreme. The prodigal says to this father, Let's quit these niceties, Let's cut out the middleman. What I really want from this relationship is your stuff. Please give it to me.

We've all been in social situations where similar desires are ever so scantily clad. Networking events, Freshers events, even worse alumni events, the vast majority of dinner parties ... Why are we there? To get some gossip, or sex, business contacts, flattery and attention, a favour, a leg up in the industry, or maybe just the kind of food and drink we could never ourselves afford.

This is very normal, very human. And it's a perceptive lens, a way of regarding others, which easily creeps into even our closest family relationships. Even good honest people might look at their parents and calculate the size of their bank account. When are they going to downsize so they can help me out? Decent people look at their children to validate their efforts as parents. I want you to make me proud, so I can feel good about myself. We may even, says Paul, carry this 'human point of view' into our relationship with God asking questions like, 'How can God improve my life?' 'How do I get his stuff?' 'And which church will best deliver that to me?'

Truth is, it's greed, the fleshly way of looking at life. And greed of course is not condemned, but is valorised in our culture. An oft-quoted beer advert in my youth said 'you only go around once in life, so you've got to grab for all the gusto you can'.

Really? That was the thinking no doubt behind younger son's request – Dad I want my inheritance now so I can go out and grab all the gusto. The consequences of that request would have been profound – especially for a farmer at that time (indeed for farmers of our time). Wealth was all tied up in land, so this father would have had to sell some, reducing his income for perpetuity in order to release money for his son's inheritance. Which in turn would have had an impact on the older brother's inheritance. But the father seems blithely unconcerned with economics. He is all about relationships – and all about freedom. Go, he says, with his heart breaking and his wallet empty – don't stay here all resentful. Go fly!

Younger brother doesn't stay aloft for very long and the rest of the story is probably familiar to you. Even in this biblically illiterate age, many of the children in the 4 schools I told this story to last week – featuring my dog Tucker as the prodigal son – knew that the father didn't get cross, didn't make the son feel guilty, but instead welcomed the son home. But it's worth regarding again a scene we think we know so well. Because the details of the father's welcome are so extravagant, especially in the pared down genre of the parable. The father from a long way off, had compassion, ran to meet his child, fell on his neck, implying tears... kissed him. Such un-patriarchal behaviour. It never fails to move me, imagining this middle-aged, perhaps elderly man, legging it down the path when he sees this shabby shoeless creature edging nervously in his direction. He is just so delighted to have his child home, safe and sound.

But what I tend to overlook, what most people forget, is the fact that this father goes out twice. Later that night, he notices that his older son is not at the party; he goes out to search for him to urge him to come in. And presumably that was the harder act of reconciliation. For where do you begin to look for a refusnik in the middle of the night? Older brother isn't even meeting him half way. When the father finally finds his elder son, once again he resists the temptation to do what I'd almost certainly do – he doesn't berate his sulky attitude, tell him to get a grip, or ask him to check his privilege.

To the dutiful son, the one who worked so hard to please his father, the one who nevertheless was really ultimately focused on the father's stuff – that kid goat he never got – to that son, the father is equally forgiving and accepting. And reassuring. Don't worry, he says, you're always with me and everything I have is yours – but what really matters is relationships, what really matters is being together, even with all our imperfections and family dysfunctions. 'It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.'

The King James version imagines so well the rhythm and cadences of a father's desire to sweep this lad into joy and reconciliation with his family. But we'll never know if that father was successful.

At the start of this month, which was of course also the start of a new year and a new decade, many prominent people across sport, culture, faith and politics published an open New Year's Day letter calling for this to be the decade of reconnection, in which we try to heal the divisions and distances which have opened up, rather ironically, in our ever more digitally connected world.

The good news of this parable, is that God has already responded to their open letter, is always and everywhere and presumably for eternity working to reconcile people to God, and to each other. God takes the initiative, goes out to meet us and draws us together. The work of transforming conflict lies at the very heart of the Jesus story, and is powered by the same force that raised Christ from death to life. If anyone is in Christ, says Paul, there is new creation. A new creation, which so often in scripture, is pictured as a feast. Come in from the cold, says God, let's party.

I'm a little bleary this evening, because yesterday I was at the wedding of two of my daughter's school friends. So I've known the couple and most of the bridesmaids and ushers since they were all about 13. And I've met many of their parents who were also guests. And what struck me most about the joyous day, and the feast which followed, was that essentially there were two generations celebrating together. The two generations represented in the parable of the prodigal son, and the two generations more or less represented in this chapel tonight. Parents and young adults. And for about twelve precious hours we rejoiced in each other's company. And in this generous rejoicing, I could see the miracle of reconciliation breaking out – the estranged father did in the end show up to walk his daughter down the aisle and deliver a very gracious speech, his ex-wife and current girlfriend hugged and cried as they met for the first time. Young people who'd had serious fallings out at school now chatted happily and Oldies like me glowed with pleasure whenever someone young broke away to come over and chat to us.

This parable of the prodigal son almost seemed to be refracted and scattered upon the crowd like light from the disco ball above us. As we danced cannons of confetti were fired up to the ceiling and filaments of golden cellophane floated down. To me they were the words of this parable. The one that ends with a feast, and with a father begging his son to come in from the night.

Gather these words up, these words you've heard tonight. Because family life is so hard and reconciliation so rare, and it's easy to get stuck out in the dark if you don't have the script of this story, this hope, this vision of forgiveness and this vision of God – the one who runs to meet us, no matter where we've been and what we've done – so hard to find that new creation if you don't keep this story, very close to heart.