

## **Gathering of God's People**

Time when we greet one another and prepare for worship.  
Those who are able please stand for the entry of the Bible.  
Words of welcome and announcements.  
Good morning! How are you?

I just want to say thank you all for your prayers last Monday.  
If you do not know by now, we were granted indefinite leave to remain. Thank you also for all your generous donations, and fund raising events to make it possible.

Three announcements:

- In Focus tonight – I will speak about the identity of a congregation.
- I have a few tickets left for the Annual stated meeting.
- I need by ways of volunteers after next Sundays service if we go ahead to organise the Holiday club. We had great success last year and we cannot let this biggest outreach event in our villages slip through our fingers. Please come forward and offer us your support!

## **Worshipping God Together**

### **Call to worship**

Minister:                   Come, let us bow the knee before the God and  
                  Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

**All:                         from whom his whole family in heaven and  
                               earth derives its name.**

### **JP 169                         My God is so big**

#### **Opening prayer and the Lord's Prayer**

Let us pray:

Lord God, we thank you for our mothers:  
those who brought us to birth, nurtured us in our infancy,  
taught us in our childhood,  
gave us a base from which to explore your world,  
and so showed us something of your love.  
Help us to appreciate our mothers properly,  
find ways of being a practical help to them,  
and reflect back to them something  
of the great love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

We ask this in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray:

**ALL:** Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever. Amen.

## **Children's address – Catherine Alexander**

### **MP 133                      Father I place into your hands**

#### **Reflecting on God's Word**

Reading:            Luke 15:11-32 (NT page 1049)

Reader:             Stan Menzies

#### **Background to the reading**

There is much more to this parable than what we generally expect. There are layers of meaning almost in every sentence, in every tone and even between the lines.

Jesus breaks with the Jewish tradition and turns it around in a surprising non threatening way. How?

Well, let's start with the beginning. In the Old Testament, or according to Jewish tradition there is always two brothers, one older and one younger competing against each other for the favour of the father. We can think of the stories of Cain and Abel, Ismail and Isaac, Esau and Jacob and Jacob's favorite son, Joseph and in his absence Benjamin, and Solomon, the youngest the son of a wife whose husband David has murdered becomes God's anointed king. Many of the stories of these younger brothers follow a stereotype. Younger sons frequently leave the house of their father to find their wealth, and so often there is something slightly scandalous in their stories and they are the favourites. Any Jew reading/hearing this parable would have without doubt understood these undertones. And most Jews would have immediately interpreted the parable as saying that the youngest was the favorite, therefore representing the people of Israel.

But Jesus was rejecting this notion all together.

How?

Let us draw a few lines and summarize the parable with the underlying tones.

The youngest son ask his father for his inheritance. It was a out of the ordinary shocking thing to do because that was as if you were saying your father is already dead! And you would have shamed your father's honour by asking something like this. But even more shocking, the father agrees, losing his honour! He divided his property between them which was also against all Jewish law and tradition. The eldest son always received a double portion and in this case, he would have received two-thirds of the inheritance and the younger brother one-third.

Jewish law did permit a father to determine which assets (especially land) would go to which sons before he died, but they could take possession only on the father's death: the father was manager and received the land's profits until then. Thus this son could

know what would be his but could not legally sell his assets. But as this is a story, anything is possible. In our parable story, he does it anyway.

Many Palestinian Jews migrated, seeking fortune in less economically pressed areas. So typically of the prototype of the young son, he squanders all he had with a choice of life that was utterly destructive. He lost all he had in a time when there was famine in the land.

Famine was a common devastating feature of the ancient economy. All sympathy will now be with this younger son. Although he is responsible for his fate, he is not responsible for the famine.

The youngest son experienced need and went to work as a laborer in the foreign land feeding pigs. Any Jewish reader or listener would have been shocked by this. First of all, he breaks all family ties by moving away from his family without asking them for help. Secondly he feeds pigs, which was a forbidden occupation. Pigs were regarded as unclean and equated to referring to the Gentiles.

His dire situation and need are expressed by ways of food and nourishment. He is so hungry that he will eat the pigs food. Why this accent? Food and drink were usually maternal metaphors, associated with the female. Jesus implies the mother, the unspoken other half of the father.

But the son comes to his senses and decided to return to his father as a hired hand or a servant. "Hired men" could be either slaves rented for hire or free servants working for pay; either one suggests that his father was well off. And again we see the maternal undertones when he speaks of food.

So he returns and again the father acts in a shocking way. The parable suggests that he was on the lookout, hoping that his youngest son will return. So when he sees him, he goes overboard and his behavior is out character for a Mediterranean patriarch. Again he violates his honour by running to his son, embracing and kissing him affectionately as it is literally described in the Greek text. To embrace and kiss were signs of forgiveness but to kiss affectionately hints again at the maternal theme.

Although the son immediately and rightly so, renounces all his rights, the father restores the son within his honour and orders his slaves to:

- Bring best robe and clothe him, which meant his own robe meaning they share now the same place,
- Put a ring on his finger, which meant a signet ring, which meant that he was given his identity back, giving him power and status,
- And sandals on his feet, indicated his superiority over them.

These are not just necessities, the father was restoring and making his son an object of honour. He even organized a feast to celebrate the fact that his son was lost, and is now found again.

But then the oldest son returns from the field and discovered that his father was having a feast with his younger brother who has returned home. He is angry because he feels that his father is unjust. SO he refuses to go into his father's house. This would have been a grievous insult to the honour of his father.

But then shockingly his father again acts in a shameful way by coming out of his house to plead with his eldest son. The oldest son insults his father by implying that his father has failed to live up to the standards of honour by welcoming the younger son after he has brought shame to their family name. It is now clear how differently the father and the eldest son look at the same events. The father is not concerned about his honour but concerned about the well being of his boys, which comes to the fore in the loving way he speaks to the eldest son. He addresses him as "my child", again very affectionate and loving. He says that as his eldest son, he is his companion and co-owner of his belongings. He does not have to earn his approval.

And very cleverly the whole meaning of the text changes. While most Jews would have guessed that the youngest son would be synonymous with Israel, according to the traditions and Jewish folklore, it becomes clear that the eldest son can indeed and surprisingly also be representing Israel.

So what is the message? The father goes out of his way to include both his sons. He showers both with affection and attention. Jesus is making the point in this parable that His father is the loving and merciful God who made it possible for everybody to inherit his kingdom. God the father does not reject. Jesus rejected any notion of some groups being rejected at the expense of another. The parable rejects any claim of Israel's self understanding of itself as the favourite, youngest son! God calls all people, Jews and Gentiles.

Amen

**MP 139**

**Father, we adore you**

**Sermon**

The text verses for the sermon are <sup>31</sup> "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> 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."

Before I start the sermon I would like to tell you a funny story I heard with regard to the lost son. When a mother finished telling the story of the lost son, she asked her daughter what she had learned. After thinking a moment, she said, 'Never leave home without your credit card!'"

Hopefully you are all wondering about my choice of text and the front picture as this is actually mother's day!

Well, I picked the reading because that is the reading according to the liturgical calendar. The picture on the front page is the last painting of Rembrandt depicting the “prodigal son”. But what is really amazing is that the hands holding the lost son, are different, one is the hand of a man, the father and the other the hand of a woman, the mother. Rembrandt also noted the maternal undertones in the text and he interpreted the parable as the inclusive love of God the father, a love that reaches beyond gender just like we find in the parable itself.

Nanda and I were indeed blessed to see this painting with our own eyes when we attended a conference in St Petersburg Russia. I remembered the goose bumps I felt when looking at the raw emotions of love and affection from the father and the dire circumstances of the son – his bald head, his rag clothes and broken sandals. And to see the two different hands just made sense. The mother was part of his life too, although according to their times, his mother would not have had the same privilege as the father did.

But what is interesting about the parable is the way the Father loves and look after his sons. He breaks with tradition, he loves like only a woman can and handles both sons in the same way. He is fair and just. He divided his property in two equal ways. What he did for the youngest son, he would also do for the eldest one. In both cases he goes out of his way to accommodate and include. And this is exactly an explanation of God’s love.

God loves unconditionally and inclusively. He does not have favourites. He accepts the sinner, you and me. He took away all our sin through the redemption of Jesus Christ on the cross. He overpowered the biggest enemy death, to ensure His children inherit His kingdom. And everyone who believes in Jesus Christ and the One who sent Him, will indeed have an equal opportunity with everyone else to inherit His kingdom. All God need is just one second of faith to change our lives for ever. God’s love goes beyond tradition, reason or understanding.

You and I have the opportunity to accept God’s love. All of us have received a Valentines card from God saying that He loves us. We can either open this card, read it again and again and remain in His love or we can open it, put it on a shelve and forget about it. But if we forget about it, we will soon feel and experience what the youngest son experienced – cut off from love. Because if we do not love God, we cannot love ourselves or others.

And if we accept God’s love we will also be able to include rather than exclude, handle the “lost” as genuine people who struggle just like you and me. When President Lincoln was asked how he would treat the rebellious southerners when they were defeated, he said, “I will treat them as if they had never been away.” Maybe we can learn lessons too. How do we treat people that does nae come to church? How do we treat people that is different to us?

The lost are valuable to God. Jesus said that He came to seek and save the lost. And we have to admit: at some point in our lives we will all feel like the “lost son”.

So maybe we can do more in our fellowship, in our worship in our acts of reaching out to include those who have fallen away from the church, those who have forgotten about God and His constant, forgiving love... Amen

**Responding to God’s word**

Our offerings are given for the ministry and mission of the church while we sing “**Let the weak say I am strong**”.

Prayer of thanksgiving: Janice Anderson

**JP 70**

**Happiness is to know the Saviour**

**Benediction Receive the blessing of God and go in peace:**

Grant, O Lord, that as we leave this building  
we may not leave your presence; and as we face the world outside we may be channels  
of your love and concern, that Jesus may bring his blessing through us. The blessing of  
God almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Be with you  
with all whom you love  
and all whom you seek to love  
This day and for evermore” **Sung Amen**