

BACKGROUND – Thursday 24 March 2016 (Maundy Thursday – John McFadzean))

(Bible Reading: Luke 15:11-31)

We commonly call this story the account of the Prodigal Son and the focus is usually on the younger son who demanded his inheritance and promptly left home to waste his father's money in a selfish lifestyle. As most people who loses their way he ended up in a huge mess. His money was gone, he was working for a pig farmer and eating the same food the pigs eat. He was at rock bottom sinking in the mire before he decided to return to his father and beg for forgiveness and the favour of just being a servant in his father's house.

Hear, then, the Parable.

The Prodigal Son's story begins like this –

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate," So he divided his property between them. Not long after... the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and squandered his wealth in wild living.

This young man acted in a very shameful way. In a Middle Eastern society the disrespect he demonstrated towards his father is beyond what most of us can relate to. As the younger son he was entitled to a third of the family estate, but only after his father's death. So in a sense he was sending a message to his dad saying I wish you were dead. If you think that's shocking his father's response of love and grace is even more shocking.

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 around him and kissed him. In the Mediterranean culture fathers never ran. A proud patriarch would never hitch up his garments, bare his legs, and run - ever. It was a breach of an elderly Jewish man's dignity to run, but it is clear that his love could take priority over dignity after a long absence.

But the older son was not happy due to the fact what gave the father and the lost son joy made the older brother resentful and angry. The older

son had always been with the father yet how little he understood him, or shared his capacity for love.

The Father, who represents God in this story, rejoiced at his sons return and made preparation for a huge celebration in his honour, however the older son was very unhappy and determined that he would not be joining the party. He felt that he had lived a morally righteous life, and he reminded his Father of all the good works he had done and how the Father had never given him a party. We can readily see that the self-righteous brother was not happy about his youngest brother's return and was in fact resentful and angry.

Dancing at celebrations was a typical Jewish custom. Elder brothers were to reconcile differences between fathers and younger brothers, but here the elder brother, returning at the end of a long day's work, refuses even to enter the house. This is also a grievous insult to the father's dignity and could have warranted a beating. Failing to greet one's father with a title Father, Sir was a grievous insult to the father's dignity. The elder brother here is a transparent metaphor for the Pharisees, and the younger brother for the sinners with whom Jesus was eating.

Because the inheritance had been divided the elder brother was already assured of his share. He had nothing to lose by his brother's return. The final response of the elder brother is never stated providing the Pharisees with the opportunity to repent if they are willing

So what does our passage mean?

In the parable the kingdom is not something that decided between, but something that unifies. The father does not reject. The metaphor for the kingdom is the father's coming out, both for the younger son and for the elder. Apart from him is division and failure. In the parable, Jesus rejects any notion of some groups being rejected at the expense of another. The parable radically rejects Israel's self-understanding of itself as the favoured, younger son. The kingdom is universal. The universalism, however, is not based on the rejection of some. All people are called.