

**SERMON: 24 March 2016 (Maundy Thursday – Dr Groenewald)**  
**(Bible Reading: Luke 15:11-31)**

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!’”

The famous Dutch artist Rembrandt actually made a painting of the lost son, interpreting the events as he saw it. It is really amazing 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 remember 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 looks 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 gender, sexual orientation, tradition, reason or understanding.

You and I have the opportunity to accept God's love. Tonight we celebrate God's love. It is as if 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 shelf 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 who do not come to Church? How do we treat people who are 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... especially on this night as we remember Jesus' sacrifice for us.

Amen