

Sunday 18 March 2007: The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Exploring Christ's Parable of the Lost and Found

Readings: Luke 15.1-3, 11-32



Detail from Auguste Rodin's *The Prodigal Son*

Today's gospel has been called by various names: 'The Parable of the Lost Son', 'The Parable of the Two Sons', 'The Parable of the Father's Love', or traditionally: 'The Prodigal Son.' This greatly loved parable, only found in Luke's Gospel, has also been called "the Gospel within the Gospel." From its very first telling it has inspired interpretations and commentaries: from the Church Fathers - Tertullian, Clement of Alexander, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine right up to the present day this is a parable which seems to have a timeless and universal ability to touch the lives of its audience and draw them into involvement. It has inspired artists- Dürer, Murillo, Rembrandt, Rodin, - composers like Animuccia, Prokofiev and Britten and its themes have been alluded to and portrayed by countless writers and dramatists: Shakespeare, Johnson, Bunyan, Wordsworth, Dickens, Gaskell, George Eliot, Hardy, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Paton, Greene and many more.

Why is it that this simple story can still hold our attention and cause us to reflect? Perhaps it provides the shape, the form, the movement of a basic human hope or a God given promise we long to believe in. Christ's Word, Christ's parable is the scaffolding we have been given to reach up and explore what lies beyond us; the scaffolding to realise in our own lives the mystery of our relationship with God. I once heard a rabbi saying that the Hebrew Scriptures are never complete: they are always in the process of becoming - because the scriptures require us to complete them in the context of our own lives. Scripture is not the revelation itself but the scaffolding for the revelation. And we need to use that structure to traverse the unknown. Revelation requires that we climb the scaffolding and make the encounter real. It is a Jacob's ladder- a going up and a coming down-the bridge between us and our experience of God's kingdom.

And of course there have always been conflicts of scriptural interpretation - it is not a modern phenomenon of our Church. The Church Father's allegorical interpretations involved such complex codes of meaning that the interpretation often seemed to keep very little recognizable relationship with the original story. And even in Christ's own telling there were differences in

interpretation. In Luke Chapter 15 Jesus' audience gather. Among those are those seeking to be "set free" by his word - the tax collectors, and the sinners and there are also those who question his authority and consider his Word blasphemy and want to call him to account and nail him down. They question by what right he interprets.

And what does our Lord do? He tells a story, he tells a parable - a parable which forces us to climb beyond ourselves and our own positions - a parable which is multi-faceted, which switches empathies and dodges defences, which disorientates and re-orientates and becomes a new means of exploration. Biblical literalism which seeks to confine and condemn is a dead thing. It is using the scaffolding to imprison us rather than climb beyond ourselves. Scriptural literalism is a failure of the imagination, it is a fear of freedom, a failure of trust: it closes down the spirit rather than opening it up. A novel written simply to illustrate a preconceived moral is almost by definition a bad novel, just as to paraphrase a poem or make it into bullet points would destroy it. Meaning and truth actually lie in the interaction between character and circumstance and God. Christ embraces narrative - he uses the story of our humanity - real humanity, flesh blood, sweat, spit, love, loss, pain struggle, joy, hope as the scaffolding. And Jesus doesn't just tell stories. He himself is the story. He is in it, he inhabits the narrative and pulls each one of us into the narrative too. So let us now enter his story.

"Father give me the share of the property that will belong to me." The demand of the youngest son immediately throws us into the action. These are words which change things, threaten relationships and demand response. Kenneth Bailey, who has spent 15 years researching this story throughout the Middle East, claims that the request in cultural terms is impossible. Inheritance is only given after death - the request he says means that our prodigal effectively wants his father dead. Our parable begins with an action of breakdown and dislocation of loyalty and family. The son seems to be saying "I don't want you, I want what you can give me." And what is this father's astonishing response? There are no questions or argument recorded here - just this absurd act of generosity... or foolishness. Is this the nature of sacrificial love or is a negation of parental responsibility and authority? We don't know the answer but I am sure every parent and every person who has ever loved knows the dilemma - to hold onto the loved one or to let go, to defend, protect and enforce or to entrust? And straight away each one of us has our own stories of parting, of separation, of betrayal or is it becoming. What is granted here at the beginning of this story is freedom and that freedom risks everything.

The younger son in the words of the New English Bible "turned the whole of his share into cash" and went away into a distant country. Our drama from that of an unnamed son in an unnamed land can become the theme for all humanity - the story of all those who have broken with place home or family because of their dreams or ambitions or longings. It is the movement of students, travellers, economic migrants, refugees, and those seeking employment. It is a movement which crosses time and culture and national frontiers. It is the longing to live more fully, achieve more, and succeed. It is the longing too for a home. It is the restlessness or the courage of the human spirit which can build cities and create fortunes and yet leave others wasted, homeless, rejected and alone.

We are not given much detail about this "far away country" simply that "he squandered his money in "dissolute living." We are free to let every culture and generation fill that detail in for themselves. In what way do we squander the resources we have been given as gift? When I toured many secondary schools performing this parable in 2005 our prodigal became a black migrant in the UK with all the temptations facing a newly arrived youth in a modern city. The dissolute living for those who performed the story became the unremitting message of a consumerist society that "to be is to have" - have money, have instant gratification, have

mobile, have *ipod*, have alcohol, have drugs, have who you want, have what you want 24/7. And it left our prodigal like the original without anyone or anything, alone on the streets.

In the drama I told the kids to walk past our prodigal. He was lying on the ground without anything, like the homeless people we often see on our city pavements. "Walk past him" I said, "like we do." Walk past him like when someone wants to sell you *The Big Issue*. And in our drama we did. And then in one school where we were performing the drama in Merseyside one young boy aged eleven confronted me:

"I don't want to walk past".

"What?" I asked.

"I don't want to walk past him, I want to help him."

"You can't do that, it's not in the script" I told him.

"But I want to help him" he said.

"Well then I suppose you better had." I replied.

He went over and put his hand on the Prodigal sons shoulder and knelt down beside him.

"Look if your hungry I can ask my Mum to get you something to eat."

Mothers are like that.

I saw that Christ's parable had made its journey across time and culture. And the story was being inhabited by this young boy who had had the courage to stand up to the pressure of group conformity and make his response his own. Christ's parable was alive and continuing its work in Merseyside and there was hope in that.

In the parable we are told that the lost son, in hunger and desolation, "came to his senses". I have often returned to those words. It is the pivot of this story, the pivot perhaps of all our stories. It is the memory of something better breaking through, the sense that even when our own possibilities seem to end there is somehow yet still possibility. I have been so aware of that in our 6.30pm Lent services *Why am I still a Christian*. It is that sense of God or even the memory of God in the midst of human struggle.

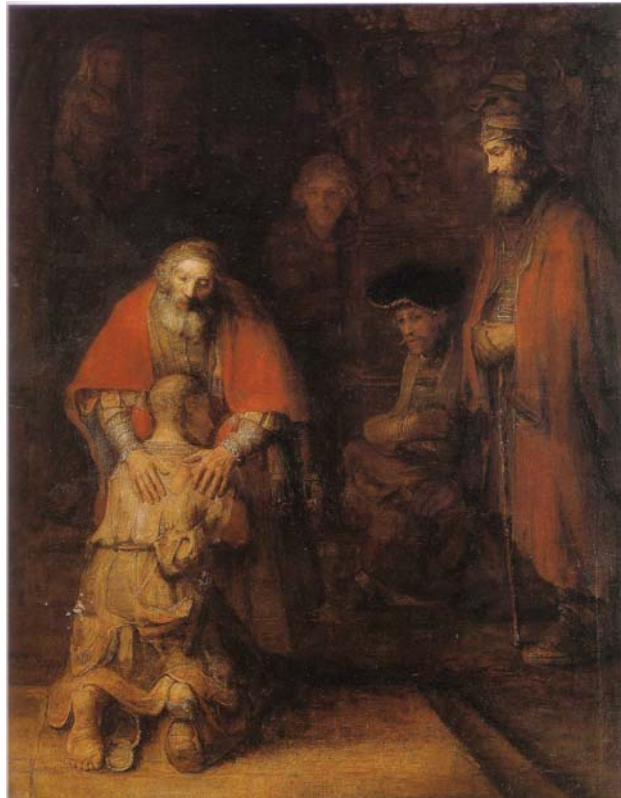
And so Christ's parable begins its return. There is nothing triumphant about it. It is not the stuff of legend when the classical hero after overcoming adversity returns to take his rightful place of honour. No, this is the return of one deeply wounded by his own sin and failure. This is one who no longer feels fit to be called a son and yet whose need is greater than his pride. In our story this broken sinner has somehow become Christ like and broken he is taking us back to the father to be healed.

And you know what? The father has in fact never left him. He is right there. He has been there all the time, watching and waiting - longing for his return. And he runs to meet his son, breaking with respectability or thoughts of dignity. He holds his son, will not listen to his confession of guilt and lifts him from his knees. The son will never be a hired servant because he is a son. This is not a court case - the son is not under a legal system of justice. He is under love and that love is increased not diminished by his sin. Neither does the father hide him away - rather he celebrates and calls others to celebrate too. He brings him into the centre of the light.

And suddenly roles are reversed and we see it is the elder brother - who on the balance sheet would seem to have done everything right - is now the lost one because just like his younger brother at the beginning of the story he has betrayed his own failure to love. As we inhabit this story we inhabit the complexities and ambiguities of our own lives and choices. The

parable asks us which of these characters are we and who do we desire to become. Are we prodigal son or the judging brother or is the move towards the father in this story?

But today is Mothering Sunday. Has Christ forgotten the mother in all of this? I phoned my mother to ask her. "Where is the mother in the parable of the Prodigal Son?" I ask. Without a pause my mother answers me: "If the story shows the forgiveness of the father think how much more the mother would forgive her children because mothers always forgive the most don't they?" she asks. "I hope so." I replied remembering I had forgotten to send her a Mother's Day card.



Yes the Mother God is at the centre of this story weaving together and longing for those she has given life and love to return- without force or violence, seeking to restore and to heal. We see the pain of love and the hope of love. When Rembrandt painted this final scene the father bends over his son and holds him, shaven headed like a child in his womb. Henri Nouwen points out the way the father's right hand is a feminine hand, refined and tender, as though wanting to console and comfort - it is a mother's hand.

This parable is not presenting God as the great male patriarch in the sky, here we have the tenderness of God echoed in the prophet Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her baby at her breast, feel no pity for the child she has born? Even if they forget, I shall never forget you. Look I have engraved you on the palms of my hand" The love of this Mother God is poured out into the son so that in our painting his ragged clothes seem transfigured -g olden - and both parent and son are filled with light. The red of the cloak is like a tent sheltering the son and we are reminded of that other image of motherhood: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem how long have I longed to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings but you would not let me"

Our parable has given us the scaffolding to explore the nature of God's love. Will the father's love be reciprocated? Will it heal the divisions and the loveless judgements? Will it cast out fear and overcome jealousies and the moral prejudices of our Church and community? Can this gentle father and mother hold in balance the tensions which rupture and destroy? Can

grace really become a reality? Will sinners return to the one who loves them or will they betray or exploit that mercy? Can we really be changed by God's love and incarnate something of the same redemptive spirit of this tender God in our own lives? If only we could, that would be a Mothering Sunday to remember.