

Sermon for 4th Sunday in Lent

Luke 15: 1-3, 11 -32

The parable of the prodigal son... or it could also be read as the parable of a prodigal daughter. Coming myself from a family of 4 girls there was a least one prodigal among us – probably because we were vicars' daughters) who lived reckless and fruitless lives for a while.

But being prodigal is only the starting point – the big picture is forgiveness – God's unconditional love for us- beyond what we deserve. This parable points to God's grace and mercy, made possible by Jesus's death on the cross, wiping the slate clean of our waywardness – our wandering away from God - and offering another chance to us his beloved children, in all our weaknesses. In this chapter 15 of Luke's gospel, we see forgiveness in action, in the abundantly generous compassionate action of a loving parent in the face of a repentant, sad, sorry and suffering child. And This Forgiveness flows on from repentance, which comes out of suffering, as Bishop Ellie spoke about last week

This parable is sometimes titled The Lost Son - It's the third of three parables in chapter 15, which all have 'lostness' in common, preceded by the parables of the lost sheep, and the lost coin. In each of these there's also rejoicing - rejoicing at finding again the lost one (or coin or sheep) Yet – as it goes - before we can be found, we will be lost, we will experience suffering - but this can open our heart for repentance, and makes forgiveness possible. Forgiveness flows on naturally (or supernaturally) from repentance.

As Jesus said in Matthew's gospel (10: 39) –'whoever loses their life for my sake will save it' - using another translation – If you try to save your life (ie, depending on your own strength) you will lose it. But if you give it up for me, Jesus said (ie, trust, and just come back to God), you will surely find it. Not only our own life, but our life in relationship to God and others,

Being able to offer the same grace and forgiveness to others – even going so far as to love our enemies - is Jesus's radical command. It's all very well, he says, being kind and generous to those we love or know, and who might give us something back in return. In the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced and embodied, the unlovable are loved, healed, and made whole. The homeless, however smelly and ragged, are embraced, the doors flung open and the banquet spread (for the least, the last and the **lost**).

I think an attitude of Openness is essential -or as those doing Lenten Study this week will have picked up, being accommodating – especially to those we think of as 'other' than ourselves. There was a quote in this week's study – 'The Kingdom of God is bigger than biology' and I would say, bigger than our friends and acquaintances and our own church community.

Take for example the ministry of waffles here – to passing school students - that happens every Thursday morning here. Or actually it starts the afternoon before with some of our senior members doing the hard yards in preparing the mixture. And then in the morning, other people cooking and serving, and some of our youth team who strike up conversations with groups of kids. You may think I'm deviating a bit from the parable, but bear with me ...These kids may not seem to be among last or least coming from well-heeled Lower Hutt, but are actually lost in the whirlwind of social pressures around them, or tensions in their families, not living up to parental expectations, not doing well at school for whatever reason. No, you won't see them turning up at church on a Sunday morning, but they might eventually hang out with people at the AYM house, and end up serving others with the same generosity as they have received.

It's having that openness, the love and acceptance God has for us - that we can offer to others non-judgmentally, mercifully -without thinking about if they deserve it or not.

Perhaps we're hearing this a bit with the ears of the older son – why should we giving a handout to these kids, some of which might be losers, who have done nothing to earn our hospitality... and may not even turn into dutiful, good citizens. Back to the parable – do you sense some bitterness from the older brother– why should he have a second chance when I've never even needed one? But if we heard the detail at the beginning of this parable, the father had already given the older son his half share of the estate – it's just that the younger son went off and blew his. He didn't deserve it, thinks the older brother - not only to be welcomed home, but then the killing of the fatted calf to celebrate his homecoming. Not fair!

But that's the point. ... God's love for us doesn't depend on what's seems 'fair'. In fact there's nothing we can do more of – or anything we can do less of - that will make God love us more, or love us less. It's without strings attached, unconditional. His grace offers us what we don't deserve – and his mercy means we don't get what we deserve – the penalty or sentence a court of law might hand out. Grace is getting what we don't deserve. And this parable of the lost son or daughter embodies God's grace and mercy - amazing grace, compassion and generosity - which we, with prayer, and the power of God's Holy Spirit working in us, can extend to others. Amen.

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