

Sermon on Luke 13: 1-3, 11b-32

It's All About Grace

So, it's Lent 4 and here's Jesus making it difficult for everyone again.

He eats with tax collectors and sinners, with the outcasts and the unworthy.

Let's have a party the Father says.

But not for the hardworking responsible one.

No, let's have a party for the runaway, layabout, morally profligate squanderer who's blown the inheritance, left his family for dead, and disappeared into a far country.

Let's celebrate the return of the son who seems to have imbibed the attitude of the wayward English footballer George Best who famously said, 'I spent 90% of my money on women and drink. The rest I wasted.'

As the prodigal returns home in sackcloth and ashes, with his tail between his legs, what's the thing to do if you're his father?

Well throw a party of course.

Place a ring on his finger and a robe on his back and kill the fatted calf.

Wait, what?

This isn't how it works?

This isn't right?

This isn't justice?

This guy deserves censure not celebration?

If we open the door at all it should be the back door for him to come crawling home with his head bowed low.

And then he's to be an indentured servant like the rest of the slaves for at least the next ten years to make it all up.

Reciprocity means he pays for what he's done.

And in this case, there's a lot to pay for.

The righteous are to be rewarded, the wicked condemned.

Neat, clean, simple, fair.

That's the way of the world and of God.

Jesus takes a different view with this most famous of stories.

'But while he was still a long way off', Jesus says, 'his Father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.'

'This son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.'

And so the world's sense of what's right, what's just, is confronted with the overwhelming and abundant grace of God.

This astonishing power which is of a wholly different order, a wholly different way.

Undeserved favour.

Unmerited love.

Extravagant hospitality, even for a prodigal sinner.

There's hope for all of us yet.

The Father throws off every piece of convention you can imagine.

He grants his son the inheritance in the first place.

He longs for his safe return, looking out expectantly at the horizon night after night.

When he catches sight of him he runs out to embrace him.

He invites the whole village in for the banquet.

And he graciously reasons with his older son that in spite of convention, and appearance, and in spite of the very reasonable and just argument he is making, they had to celebrate and rejoice, for that which was lost is found.

There has been a change and he who was far off has come home again.

At different points in the Father's story he risks looking reckless, weak, naïve, unjust, extravagant, foolish, disingenuous, and as one playing favourites.

And he does it anyway, for this is at the heart of the nature of God.

'There is more rejoicing in heaven', Jesus says, 'over 1 repentant sinner, than 99 righteous people who do not need to repent.'

When the 1 sheep goes missing, Jesus will leave the other 99 to find it.

The repentant thief comes to his senses in the minutes before his death and Jesus assures him, 'Today, you will be with me in paradise.'

All is grace.

Every moment, every stunningly beautiful moment set within the rough horrors of the world.

It's all about grace.

And it strikes against every inkling we possess.

And as we all know, it is mighty hard to live.

One of the most poignant religious metaphors of the twentieth century is the scene of the British and German soldiers of WWI praying on either side of the divide to the same God, for the same victory.

That scene is indeed a powerful sign of humanity's stubborn resistance of God's way of grace.

It is so locked within us that we think we can even marshal God himself into our distorted arguments.

God is on our side, surely, we say.

Maybe if we just say it enough it will come true.

And so we pray as if we ourselves can dictate the will of God.

Dear Lord, let us tell you how it is supposed to be, and you better meet our demands quick smart.

How the parable of the prodigal son was ever written down remains something of a mystery to me.

I can imagine some scribe back in the first century meticulously copying it down thinking to himself, hang on, what's this Jesus on about here?

I might just change this a bit to help it make a little more sense.

I'll just get the father to punish the younger son first and reward the elder and seem a bit sterner and foreboding.

There'll be some cross words of judgement and moralising just to make sure people don't get the wrong idea.

I'll give the older son his reward and set the younger as now lesser in his father's eyes following his indiscretions.

Nope.

It's all about grace from beginning to end.

The amazing grace of God.

The father is on neither of his son's 'side' and yet both at the same time.

His grace is available for both, his love for both, his wish that each would live faithfully, making room for others, applied to both.

They both need to turn around, one recognises his fractured existence and does, the other doesn't and won't.

The Father's love is the only constant.

The parable presents humanity as being able to change from its errant ways, but leaves the question open for all of us, will we?

God is on none of our sides, yet God is on all of our sides.

God doesn't will victory for us in whatever form, but a reconciled relationship with our creator – no pretence, no front, no looking like we're this or that to impress others, just ourselves.

Along with the divine grace of the father, perhaps the other astonishing part of this story is the moment of conversion for the younger son.

'He came to himself.', the text says.

He came to himself, turned around, and started for home.

It's as if he had been living a mirage previously.

Like an out of body experience, he was in exile from his true self.

We have been made to be in relationship with God and when we digress from that way of life we fall away from our true purpose.

So when we have that eternal moment of realisation, of self awareness at how far away we have run from our creator, it's a moment of divine clarity.

We see as God sees for a split second.

We literally come back to ourselves.

We see in that cataclysmic moment our true end, our true selves, the people we have been made to be.

And we run home, only to find God our father, our mother, running out to meet and embrace us, throwing a party at our return.

God's grace has been infused into our being.

It is set within us and when we recognise it, like a magnet, we are drawn more and more, back and back into the source of that grace, the heart of God.

Wherever we have been, and however far we have fallen, we are never beyond the grace of God.

As it turned out despite his physical distance from home, the prodigal was closer than his elder brother who had been at his father's side all his life, yet still hadn't come to himself being firmly stuck in his own self righteousness.

Being in church may say nothing about how close we are to God.

And perhaps there are many beyond these doors who this very day are coming to themselves and seeking after the heart of their heavenly father.

It's very easy, of course, to see the parable of the prodigal son as a moral tale.

Give up your wayward ways and let go of your self righteousness.

While these are perfectly reasonable conclusions to draw, seeing the story in the first place as a vivid picture of the place of grace in God's purposes seems to me a much more fruitful reading.

And the message is that God is all about grace, grace in creation – that we have this wonderful world to sustain us and nurture us and grace in the heart of God's own being – in Jesus we find forgiveness, reconciliation, and celebration of relationships restored.

In a world so often characterised by violence and hate, the power of the returning prodigal retains its stunning impact today.

You can't paraphrase grace, as Marilynne Robinson says, it is just what it is.

Grace is grace and it resists every attempt at qualification.

When you have received grace from another there is no explanation other than it was the touch of God.

And when you've offered grace to another there's no explanation other than you have shared the touch of God.

Grace is grace.

And the more extravagant the gesture, the more Christ-like the action.

Self righteousness is in the end a spiritual cul-de-sac.

It closes things down, especially relationships.

Grace and reconciliation opens up all sorts of new possibilities for a different way and a different time.

There's a great cartoon of St Peter greeting a man at the pearly gates and saying to him: You were a believer, yes. But you skipped the 'not-being-a-jerk-about-it part.'

Grace is grace.

A large part of the difficulty is that we so often give ourselves a harder time than God does.

It's not that God excuses unkindness or selfishness or bigotry or hate, grace doesn't deny the wrongdoing it says it won't let the wrongdoing frame who we are.

Coming to ourselves is one thing, but do we have the courage to return home, risk feeling ashamed, and in receiving forgiveness, learn to forgive ourselves?

I was saying to someone during the week, I'm much better at remembering the things I've done wrong in life than the good stuff.

I tend to recount the times I've fallen away from grace and the memories linger, rather than remembering that I am kept in my heavenly father's care and receive his grace day by day.

Frederick Buechner once said that it's far easier to write about sin than it is about grace, maybe that's because we're so good at holding onto it, even when we've been assured that the wideness of God's grace is wide enough for us too?

And chances are, I'm imagining, that if we're not very good at forgiving ourselves, we're not going to be very good at forgiving others, and reconciliation parties to celebrate are going to be way out of the question.

Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as yourself... perhaps a little more attention to the 'as yourself' part of the commandment mightn't hurt?

The good news is that even our unwillingness to show grace to ourselves God's grace can overcome.

Grace is grace.

Jesus eats with sinners just like us.

If you had to draw a picture, or write a story about your own life, what would grace look like?

Where would it be found?

How would it be received?

In what relationships in what ways?

Maybe this is still some of your story or your picture to fill out in this sense?

Maybe like the parable itself your story is unfinished?

Maybe there is still time to forgive, to welcome home, and to receive grace yourself and be reconciled?

This is true of our human relationships of course, but it is also true of our relationship with God.

Grace is grace.

It doesn't change and it is wide enough for you and for me, if we'll only come to ourselves, turn and journey home into our creator's loving arms.

Perhaps Lent, perhaps today is a time you can start to make that journey and become the person you were made to be.

“There is hope for the people of the cross for the darkness leads to the dawn, the night to the day, and death gives way to life, forevermore, Amen.”