

The heart of the gospel – walking with grace

27 March 2022 – Lent 4

BIBLE READINGS

Isaiah 55:1-9

‘Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.
Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labour on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.
Give ear and come to me;
listen, that you may live. ...
Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.
Let the wicked forsake their ways
and the unrighteous their thoughts.
Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.
‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,’
declares the Lord.
‘As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.’

Then Jesus told them this parable:

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 that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for

a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." So he got up and went to his father.

But 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 round him and kissed him.

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."

The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

"My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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."

MESSAGE The heart of the gospel – walking with grace

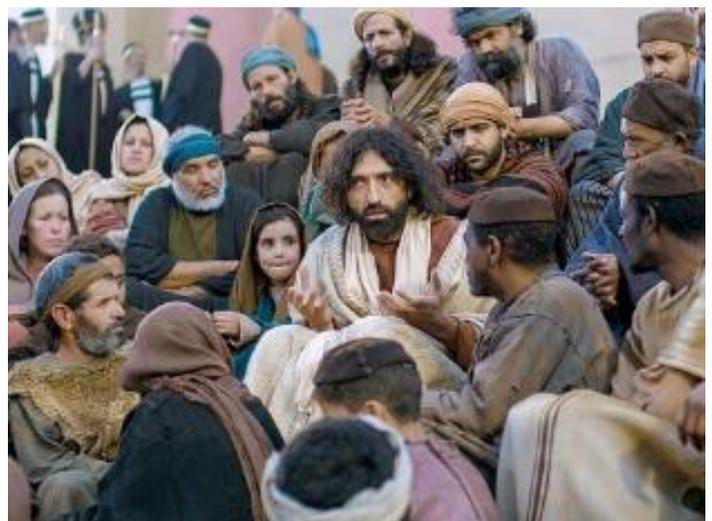
Luke's Gospel contains two well-known parables – two stories – that help to define and distinguish Christian faith from all other faiths – namely the parable of the **Good Samaritan** and today's parable, traditionally known as the parable of the **Prodigal Son**, but which could also be called the parable of the Lost Son. Both parables are stories of suffering and compassion.



It's a fairly big claim that these two stories shape Christian identity – but together they illustrate the **nature of God** and what is an **appropriate response of faith**. And it is these two of faith – along with the person and role of Jesus – that make Christianity unique among the world's religions.

We will have to explore today's parable a little deeper before we can point to what is so distinctive about Christian faith, but I've already given you a major clue with my sign for today – with the **heart shape** and the word 'grace'.

But let's consider the parable itself first. Context is always important. Certain types of people were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. They included **tax collectors** – despised for helping the Romans oppress the Jewish people economically – and other unidentified '**sinners**' – people who didn't follow God's ways of living for whatever reason. Jesus, it seems, was quite at ease in their company and is happy to share his meals with such people.





Not so the Pharisees. Last week they showed **kindness** to Jesus by warning him about Herod's threats, but in today's passage they are back to **grumbling** about Jesus. Their complaint? Jesus is offering hospitality to these 'sinners' – these undesirable types – welcoming and **eating** with them!

This same issue will resurface in the book of Acts and in Paul's letters when Jewish Christians start sharing meals with ... wait for it ... **non-Jewish people!** We may wonder what all the fuss was about, but it was a big deal back then who you ate with – because it demonstrated your **status** in society and also your **theology** – who is acceptable to God. Clearly Jesus and the Pharisees had very different views.

Jesus tells three parables in response to the grumbling – that we know as the parable of the **lost sheep**, the parable of the **lost coin**, and what I've called the parable of the **lost son**.



In the first two stories, something important and valuable is lost, is eventually found, leading in each case to a big celebration. Jesus finishes these stories with the comment that there is **joy in heaven for every sinner who repents**. So the lost sheep and the lost coin both represent 'sinners' who have repented and turned back to God and thus have been 'found' again.

The party in heaven suggests that God is **delighted** when such people are 'found' or brought back into the fold. This is exactly what Jesus is doing throughout his ministry – searching out and rescuing such people and

restoring them to God and to community. So take note Pharisees – and readers like us!

Jesus then tells a third parable, which is more open-ended.

This time there is a father with two sons. The younger son acts **scandalously** by requesting that his father give him his share of the family inheritance right now. This was **disrespectful** behavior by the son and **shameful** for the father. Any dividing up of inheritance should only happen when the father has died.



The son takes the money, travels far away and spends all the money on wild living.



His situation goes from bad to worse when there is a famine. He has nothing to eat, so hires himself as a labourer, looking after pigs, which are unclean animals in Jewish eyes. He is a classic sinner in the



eyes of the Pharisees – deliberately ignoring the ways of God – and deserving no pity.

But the son has a **light bulb** moment – a flash of insight – perhaps born out of desperation. He will return home to his father, confess his sin and ask to be treated like a worker for hire.

What sort of welcome will he receive?

We know how the story goes. Rather than receiving **condemnation**, he receives **compassion** from his father. Rather than being treated like a for-hire labourer, he is showered with gifts and a party is held in his honour.



So far this third parable is just like the first two. The son who was lost has now been found. As the father expresses it, the son who was **dead** is now **alive** again. This is a story of **grace** – undeserved favour – and of **joy**. If the father figure in the story represents God, then God is shown to be **extravagant** and **generous**, full of **grace** and **compassion**.

The reading from Isaiah paints a similar picture of God – who invites people to come and **feast**, to eat bread and drink wine, all provided freely and abundantly. Come to me and live! Be provided for and pardoned – forgiven – if you will just turn back to me and follow my ways.

How is this possible? Isaiah notes that God does not think or act as humans do. God's ways and God's thoughts are higher than ours. They are more generous, wiser and even extravagant – as seen in the feeding of the 5000 when everyone present has their hunger fully satisfied and there are twelve baskets of food left over. So this, according to Jesus' parable about the lost son, is what God is like. Hold onto that thought ...

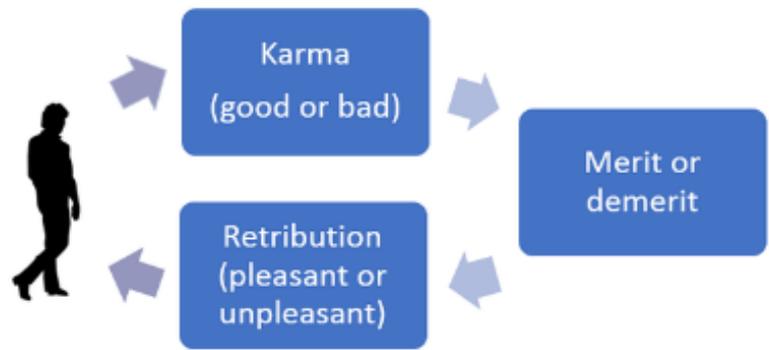
But the parable has another key character and a further message – the older son and his attitude.

He hears the party going on and wants to know what's happening. When he hears that the celebration is being given for his younger brother, he is **angry** and **resentful**. And why not? **He** has always been the faithful and responsible one, the one who does the right thing, who obeys his father and does not pursue selfish aims. He is the model son ... and in the context of the parable, he is just like ... the Pharisees.



But when the father leaves the party to go out to him, we find that not all is right in their relationship. The older son resents that a party has never been thrown for **him**, despite his years of serving his father. But listen to the language ...

The story also expands the notion of who is **acceptable** to God and what we must **do** to be acceptable to God. Most religions are based on **merit**. One **earns** blessing or salvation dependent on how one lives.



Many religions teach that one should be kind to others and help the poor, but one's standing with God – or the many gods or even with the cosmos itself – depends on how actively and conscientiously one has followed the guidelines or rules or expectations of the religion.

Blessing has to be **earned** and is based on **merit**.

This was the attitude of the older son in the parable and also the common attitude of the Pharisees. If one is obedient and meticulously follows the rules, that will lead to blessing.

The **scandal** of the parable – and the **scandal** of the gospel – is that God is not like that. Yes there are plenty of guidelines for living, but the God we worship is **compassionate** and **gracious** – and freely welcomes **everyone** who will turn to God and admit their need – whether they are young or old, rich or poor, saint or sinner, Jew or Gentile, deserving or not deserving.



Relationship with God is a **free gift** that is open to all and is **not** based on merit. This is the **heart of the gospel** and lies at the heart of Christian faith.

Perhaps you all know this already, but some of us need reminding from time to time how **radical** and **life-giving** this truth is.

... and we also need to consider the **implications** for our walk with Jesus, which is our theme during Lent.

From the perspective of the **younger son**, I wonder how often we turn away from God's ways to seek pleasure or popularity? To what extent do we use our gifts and resources to further our **own** ends rather than serving others? I wonder whether we are always aware of our emptiness and deep needs and whether we are prepared to humble ourselves and accept God's grace and forgiveness?



From the perspective of the **older son** – the frowning figure on the left – I wonder the extent to which we **delight** and find **joy** in our relationship with God or whether our walk has become a kind of **duty**? Do we see that we too need forgiveness ... and that we really are no more deserving than anyone else? How readily do we admit our deep need for God's **love**?

And then, perhaps, most challenging of all, if we are to follow the way of Jesus, this means learning from the actions and attitudes of the father figure in the parable. How might we move from the one seeking forgiveness to become one who actively **forgives**? ... from the one who is welcomed with open arms to become the one who **welcomes others**? ... from the one who **receives** compassion to become the one who **offers others** compassion... to both friend and stranger alike? ...

God, speak to our hearts today and show us the way forward..