

Parable Sermon Series: Prodigal Son
Luke 15 v11-end,
2 Corinthians 8 v7-15
23.7.06, St Mary's Banbury

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home....

Familiar words? Can you place them? Yes, from one of the thanksgiving prayers at the end of our communion service.

As we say them they place us in this picture – in the place of the returning Son – the prodigal son. And let's turn straightaway and look at our window for today.

A very traditional patterned border, but the background, unlike the other windows we've looked at is asymmetric. Indeed, each quarter is different. Start with the upper right quarter and travel round anti-clockwise, I wonder whether we could be travelling through the four seasons. The blossom of spring, the foliage of summer, the fruits of autumn and the holly in berry for winter. Note too the 4 medallions of creatures –all to be found in the Rectory garden in the last 24 hours! Yes, a bird at the top, butterflies either side and a little mouse at the bottom – and I found myself face to face with such a furry figure yesterday morning down in our wild zone!

And the central picture is quite obviously that of the re-union between father and son in the parable. The father is clearly a well off man. Several layers of gorgeous robes, sandals on his feet. And in the background a sturdy looking house, with the door wide open. The father in his haste of spotting his son, dashes out of the house, leaves the door ajar, and races down the road to greet his son.

The son probably doesn't look much like he did last time he saw him.

- He departed in fine clothes, he returns in little more than his last loin cloth.
- He departed well nourished – he returns somewhat wasted.
- He departed with sandals on his feet – he returns bare-footed. Sons wear shoes, slaves don't. An old Negro spiritual sings of the hope for the future – when all God's children wear shoes.
- He departed with a bag of money (1/3 of his father's estate was the portion due to the younger son) - literally "loaded". He returns empty handed, other than a staff to help him along the way.
- He departed able to look his father in the eye and demanding his share of the property, he returns burying his face in his hands, not able to meet his father's gaze.

Perhaps it is as well the window doesn't have a scratch and sniff option! Smell the father – then smell the son

And yet, despite all these differences, the father recognised his son, even when he was still far off – and ran to greet him. The father even recognised him, despite the fading light – the Bible doesn't actually tell us what time of day the reunion happened but the window indicates it was evening – note the red sky, similar to that in the "Lost Sheep window" opposite – but the darkness of the sky may hint at the dark places and dark times the son had been through in contrast to the light surrounding the place that is home.

The verse from the parable which the Heaton, Butler and Baynes, the stained glass window makers have chosen to highlight is “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son”. The words of this younger son as he falls on his knees before his father. Words which match our liturgy near the beginning of the service. But our liturgists have chosen a different emphasis of the parable for the end of the service.

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home....

And we can see a similar change in emphasis when we consider the changes in the title of the parable which have come about in more modern times. We’ve probably all be brought up with the title of this parable being “The Prodigal Son” but increasingly it is being called the Parable of the Loving father putting the emphasis, not on the lostness of the son but on the enormous love of the Father.

This is the parable which tells the miracle of God’s grace and love par excellence. The parable tells of a Father who lets his son make a choice. Yes, the choice may have saddened him (though the parable doesn’t say it did) but the son was free to leave his father’s property and make his own way in the world. Remember this when you, or others say or think, “Why doesn’t God stop these dreadful things happening in the world.”

The son goes as far from his home as possible – both geographically, we’re told he went to a distant country, but also he rejected prudence in favour of squander, he rejected upright living in favour of dissolute living, he rejected his religious scruples in favour of the only employment he could get – looking after pigs was abhorrent to a Jew. He was as far as he could be from the home he left. Jesus tells the story as it is – note he passes no judgement on the younger son.

But then comes the turning point. “But when he came to himself” and that was when he decided to head for home and plead to be taken on as a hired hand. Jesus believed that when someone is far from God they are not truly themselves. When we come home to God, then we become truly ourselves. St. Augustine put it this way – our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.

And so the son heads for home – and what a home coming it is. His father dashes out to greet him, to embrace him to kiss him, He calls for a robe to put on his body, a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. This retrograde was being accepted back not as a slave but as a son and given symbols of power (the robe) and authority (the ring) . Wow!

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This is indeed the parable of the Loving Father.

But it could also be called the Parable of the 2 sons. But the window shows no other son. It is tempting to stop reading at verse 23 Get the fatted calf. Let us eat and celebrate this son of mine was lost and is found.

But the parable goes on – enter stage right elder son. He’d been out in the fields working. I’ve searched the window to find a hint of an elder brother slaving away in the field. Now Heaton, Butler and Baynes, were blooming-good stained window makers – the tops of their day. We’ve looked at the other windows and seen just how much detail they can pack into them – surely they could have got the elder brother in the background. As the elder sibling in my family I put this

point quite strongly: It's always the same, eldest child has to wait till they are 17 before they can have high heels, younger child gets them at 10! It just isn't on and the eldest brother certainly didn't think it was on when he returns from his day slaving in the field and smells fatted calf for the returned prodigal!

I wonder whether the window designers omitted the elder brother well, because well it is all a bit embarrassing isn't he? He does make a legitimate point – I've worked all my life for you. I've never disobeyed you and you never even gave me a small goat to celebrate with my friends. Is God really this unfair? Not a question we want face up to – best leave him out of the window!

But I think Heaton, Butler and Baynes were right to leave the elder son out of the picture – for he wasn't at home, was he? Yes, of course he was in the sense that he lived at home and worked on the property and never got to go on his travels and sow his wild oats. But he wasn't at home in himself, was he? He has yet to come to himself? The father comes out to find him too (he was so angry he would not go into the house, the home) and reminds him, "You are always with me, all that is mine is yours" – and it is for the younger son has had his share of the inheritance – the rest, all of it, goes to the elder son.

I realised how like the elder son I am when I heard a definition of wealth the other day..... how would you define wealth? The definition which made me come a little more to myself was along the lines of "Wealth – having all that you need – and a bit more than your neighbour!" Ouch – it rang uncomfortably close to home.

Remember, Jesus told this parable in response to those grumbling that, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." God does indeed welcome sinners and eats with them. He invites us to eat with Him today – and it is after having taken communion, eaten and drunk with him, that we respond:

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home.

Where am I in this picture? Where are you?

I suspect I migrate between the younger son and, off stage right, the elder son. But God is always the loving Father wanting to welcome both home.