

27 March 2022

Joshua 5:9-12
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Mothering Sunday owes its origins to the fact that the original readings set down for the fourth Sunday in Lent contained mother images. This then led by the 16th century to the development of practices associated with the idea of mothers, starting first of all with the practice of returning to one's "mother church" on the day – usually the church in which one was baptised, or the cathedral of the diocese. There was thus a sense of the coming together of families. Later came the even more family-focussed practice of allowing domestic servants and labourers on estates a day off to visit their mothers. And of course the natural follow-on from all that was some kind of celebration with special food and the honouring of mothers with gifts of some kind.¹

Today, ironically, happens to be my mother's birthday. Mum lives in north Waikato, and if I was up there I would be able to join in a celebratory family meal today and this morning I would have gone with Mum to the church in which I was confirmed.

I enjoy films and TV programmes that depict families being reunited. I think for example of New Zealander David Lomas with his *David Lomas Investigates*, and a few years ago his *Lost and Found*, where he tries to locate and bring together long-lost relatives. More recently we have seen *Reunited*, where Russian-born adoptees in New Zealand are reunited with their birth parents. Often in these stories we find that those involved have a deep need for a sense of their family identity and a deep need for reconciliation from the hurts of the circumstances of their separation.

We are all, I expect, very familiar with the story commonly referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, about a young man who demanded his inheritance from his father, then left home and squandered it all in wild living.

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/stories-and-features/mothering-sunday-what-are-its-origins-church> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mothering_Sunday

Eventually, penniless, he is forced to work herding despised pigs. At last he recognises the error of his ways. His return is met by his father's forgiveness, demonstrated in extravagant fashion in a great feast.

We can imagine the return as being like one of the climax scenes in one of David Lomas's programmes. Those scenes bring tears to my eyes: and I imagine that I would have had tears if I'd witnessed the reconciliation of the parable's father and son.

But there is more going on here than first meets the eye.²

It is easy for us to imagine that the story is all about the young man repenting; repenting of his offence of a life of wild living and squandering his share of the family wealth. But actually the real offence occurs right at the start of the story. The younger son's request is unheard of. His request is not merely, "Dad, I want you to leave me half your estate in your will". This request is to have his father divide the estate between the two brothers and *to then settle it in cash, before the old man died*. It amounts to the son *wishing his father dead*. It is the most profound breach in relationship.

If that's unheard of, then the father's response is even more extraordinary. The expected response to the son's request would have been an explosion of rage, the son beaten or disciplined in some other way. But the amazing thing is that the father agrees to the request. It is a demonstration of the most profound love, a love that grants the freedom even to reject the one who loves.

And that profound love is apparent at the prodigal's return. We can picture the scene. News is likely to get out that the young man is coming back into the village. Given the unheard-of action of the son against his father, the villagers are certain to gather along the road to abuse and mock him. So what the father does when his son reappears amounts to a series of actions

² The following points owe a great deal to Bailey, pp.142-206, with direct quotation in places.

designed to protect him from the hostility of the villagers and to restore him into fellowship within the community. And all this begins with the father running down the road.

An oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere. To do so is beneath his dignity. So here the father's running is an expression of compassion. The father effectively runs the gauntlet for his son. He then makes the reconciliation public at the edge of the village, in full view – wrapping his arms around his son in warm embrace, kissing him on the cheek repeatedly. Now when the son enters the village it will be under the protective care of his father's obvious acceptance.

In the face of the father's extravagant demonstration of love, the son is changed. He had come back home, repentant, willing to become merely one of his father's servants. That was the plan he had rehearsed in his mind while working with the pigs.

However, his father's unexpected demonstration of love – which he doesn't deserve – makes him realise the break in the relationship which he can do nothing to heal. He realises that in the face of this extravagant love he actually has nothing worthwhile to offer in return. This can't be an economic transaction³, because the father's act outweighs anything the son could possibly give. To assume he can compensate his father with his labour would be an insult. "I am unworthy" is now the only appropriate response. The new relationship can only be a pure gift from his father.

It is often the case that we forget that there are two sons in this story. It is worth taking a couple of minutes to pick out a couple of points about the elder son.

Firstly, all is not well with the elder son right from the beginning. He should have protested about his brother's request for half the estate in the first place.

³ This insight from Frederickson.

He, after their father, should have been the first to object to his brother's extremely insulting demand. But he is silent. There is a suggestion here that the elder son's relationship with his father is not all it should be.

And further, he apparently doesn't undertake his proper role as a reconciler. As the elder son, he should have been active, trying to restore the relationship between his brother and their father.

At the other end of the story the state of things gets even clearer. The older son isn't just acting like a spoilt brat or grump when their father acts so surprisingly in welcoming his brother. He refuses to participate in the banquet he is throwing. Custom requires his presence. At such a banquet the older son, the first-born, has an important role in helping to ensure that all are made welcome. This son's refusal is an insult. And it would have been an obvious one, as the other guests would notice his absence and infer some breakdown in the father-son relationship.

The insult continues, as he refuses to obey his father's request to come and join the banquet and then goes so far as to lecture his father about how unfair his treatment has been.

But once again, the father's response is surprising. To such insults an angry response would be expected. The father would be expected to make a point of going on with the banquet without the older son, or, more likely, at least to make some comment or action to demonstrate extreme displeasure.

But here too, the father comes out, anxious for the older son, pleading with him, desiring to restore the rift in the relationship.

Now we can get as affected by this story as we might with one of the true stories displayed in the *Lost and Found* programme. But we need to remember that it is a parable, a story Jesus told to make a point.

So what is the point? I hope you appreciate now that the most remarkable figure in the story is the father himself.⁴ One might even call this ‘the parable of the Running Father’. The father’s lavish welcome is the point of the story: Jesus is explaining why there is a party, why it’s something to celebrate, when people turn from going their own way and begin to go God’s way.

And because the young man’s degradation is more or less complete, there can be no question of anything in him commending him to his father, or to any onlookers. As the young man himself recognises in the moment of embrace, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son”.

But the father’s closing line says it all. “This son of mine was dead and is alive; he was lost and now is found.”

That’s the cause of celebration; that’s God the Father’s goal; this is what God’s love is like.

Implied inside the parable of the Prodigal Son or the Running Father, there is another story – that of the Exodus, in which Israel is brought out of slavery in Egypt and brought home to the promised land. (We heard something of the ending of that story in our Old Testament reading.)⁵ Many years after settling in the promised land, after long rebellion, Israel was sent into exile in Babylon; and, though many of the exiles returned, most of the people around Jesus’ time reckoned they were still living in virtual exile, in evil and dark days, with pagans ruling over them. They were still waiting for God’s great reversal, waiting for God to produce a new Exodus, a liberation that would bring them out of their spiritual and social exile and restore their fortunes once and for all. For Jesus to tell a story about a wicked son, lost in a foreign land, who was welcomed back with a lavish party – this was bound to be heard as a reference to the hope of Israel.

The father declares, “This my son was dead, and is alive.” Ever since Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of the dry bones the idea of resurrection, of being

⁴ Following section owes much to (including direct quotation from) Wright, *Luke*, pp.187-188.

⁵ Wright, *Luke*, 188

restored to life, had been used as picture-language for the true return from exile.

And Jesus' point is that that is exactly what is happening right here, right now, in his life and ministry. When people repent and turn back to God, responding positively to the gospel message of Jesus, then and there the true return from exile is happening, whether or not it looks like what people expected.

While the parable is of the father's amazing love, and while we are expected to see the father as representing God the Father, we can also see something of the work of Jesus Christ in it. The father does not wait at home for his son – he runs to the edge of the village to greet him and welcome him. There is something in here about God in the person of Jesus Christ coming among humankind in order to bring reconciliation. Similarly, the father goes out – leaving the banquet – in order to seek reconciliation with the older son.

The parable is left unended – we don't know what the older son ultimately chooses to do. This was deliberate. Jesus was addressing his story to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. As tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.'

In this parable, Jesus is explaining why it is that he welcomes sinners and eats with them – he is welcoming these lost sons and daughters, these prodigals, home.

And in talking of the older son, Jesus is challenging the Pharisees and the teachers of the law to recognise their own rebellion against God, and asking the question of them – “Will you come into the banquet; will you be reconciled?”

And finally, we note that part of the Pharisee's rebellion is their lack of recognition that God desires all people to be in fellowship with him, not just those of who regard themselves as “in the right”. Part of coming into the banquet is recognising the right of the Father to call whom he will, and being

willing to enter into fellowship not only with the Father but with all the others present no matter who they are or what they have done.

The story is open-ended. It demands of us a response; we need to supply an ending in our own lives.⁶ What role in the story do you, and we as the church, find comes most naturally? How can we move towards becoming people through whom “resurrection”, new life, happens to others? How can we celebrate the party of God’s love in such a way as to welcome not only the younger brothers who have come back from the dead, but also the older brothers who thought there was nothing wrong with them?

As Saint Paul said,

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Sources:

- Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, Eerdmans, 1976
- Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001/2004
- Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays: Year C*, SPCK, 2000
- Sharon H Ringe “Commentary on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32”
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2788
- David E Frederickson, “Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:16-21”
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2760

⁶ Wright, *Luke*, 192