



The Father's love and the Heavenly Party (Mark2)

Have you ever been lost? Isn't it frustrating when you are driving around in your car and you have no idea where you are or how to get to where you want to be. Particularly if you are a man you have this reluctance to ask any one the way. It's probably part of our male pride.

The story goes that an English tourist was lost in Ireland. As he was driving around he saw this Irishman leaning on a gate by the side of the road. So having overcome his reluctance to ask for directions, he stopped the car. He went up to the man and said, "Can you tell me how to get to Kilkenny?" "Well", said the man, 'if I was going to Kilkenny, I wouldn't start from here!"

One of the other things that can be lost is information on a computer! May be most of you don't use computers. However, in our building just about every one has a computer. One of these users can be typing for ages, when their computer crashes and they lose all their work. To say this is frustrating is an understatement. It has been recorded that some people throw the keyboard against a wall.

Well the story goes that Satan and Jesus were arguing as to who was the most creative when it came to writing computer programs. So they decided to have a competition to see which of them could write the better program. They would let God the Father be the judge. So they both sit down at their computers and begin to type furiously. Lines of code are streaming into their computers. Just before the competition time is up, a bolt of lightning strikes, taking out all the electricity. Moments later the power is restored, and just a few moments later God announces the competition is over. First he asks Satan to show what he has come up with. Satan indignantly protests, "I have nothing! I lost it all when the power went out". "Well let's see what Jesus has come up with" says God. So Jesus starts his program and it is magnificent. All sort of wonderful functions appear on the computer all to the sound of a heavenly choir of angels coming out the computer's speakers! Satan is astonished, and he stutters, "B-b-but how? I lost everything, yet Jesus' program is intact! How did he do it?" God chuckles, "Satan, when are you going to learn ...Jesus saves!"

Our story this morning is about a lost son. In many Bibles the story is called the Prodigal Son. Personally I think the story should be called the amazing love of the Father.



It is important to remember that Jesus was a Jew and this story is a Jewish story. We so often read it as 21st Century English people and lose some of the flavour and truth of the story.

So let me just remind you of some of the background to this story. And the first thing to remember is that the Jews would have been deeply into story telling. We in the west in this century are much more into factual things. In fact we have the Internet and mobile phones and can exchange information in a way that 1st Century Jews wouldn't have even dreamed of. Yet we are probably less aware of life and living it than the Jews were in Jesus time. So the teachers or rabbis in Jesus time would have mainly taught as Jesus did by telling stories. They wouldn't have had the type of sermons that we are used to.

Also we have to remember that Jewish society was divided into just 2 classes. They didn't have upper, middle and lower class. No, they had the in-crowd and out-crowd. The in-crowd were the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the rich people. For these people could afford to keep all the ritual of the Jewish law and way of life. In their eyes they were acceptable to God. God liked them and accepted them. However, in their eyes the tax collectors, the poor and nearly everybody else was not acceptable to God. Very much at the bottom of the pile though above tax collectors were shepherds. For shepherds were too busy out in the fields looking after the sheep to attend the synagogue or keep all the aspects of the law.

But this Christmas be surprised and delighted that the good news of Jesus birth was first announced to shepherds out in the fields.

But this family that Jesus speaks about in this story are a rich family and part of the in-crowd. The sort of people that the Jewish society thought were acceptable to God.

The final thing to remember as you read this story is that Jews and pigs just do not mix. To the Jew the pig was a very unclean animal. I don't mean just physically. No to a Jew a pig was totally unclean according to their religious laws. In fact so awful were pigs to a Jew that if a small spot of pig fat fell on your best china cooking pot from Fortnum and Mason's in Jerusalem; you would take the pot out and smash it to pieces and throw it away.

So in this story is this rich Jewish father who has 2 sons. The younger one says to his father, "When you die half your estate and money will be mine". "But I don't want to wait, please let me have it now." The father, because he loves his son, gives him the money. He no doubt purchased the latest racing camel. Then he travels to a far country. There he spent his money. While he spent his money he has lots of friends. But when the money is gone, so have all his friends. It reminds me of that old jazz classic song, 'Nobody loves you when you're down and out'. So he has to find some work and finishes up looking after pigs. And as we have seen to finish up feeding pigs was about as low as you could get as a Jew.

Even then he is still hungry and has to eat the pig food. How low can he get. But then he thinks to himself, why don't I go back to my father's house and become a servant of his. At least I will have some where to sleep and I will have food to eat.



So he sets out to return to his Father's house. When he is still some way of his father comes running to meet him. Before he can get out his well rehearsed phrase about how he has blown it all and want to be a servant, his father throws his arms around him. No doubt he was very dirty and he didn't smell very nice either, and much of the obnoxious smell was that of pigs.

But his father puts a ring on his finger. This is a sign of belonging to the family, with all the position and authority that this bestows upon him. He places a robe around him. The Greek word used is stole. This was a long fitting gown which implied dignity and was worn by the upper classes. We need to remember as we have seen that in Jewish society the ethos was that if you were a Pharisee or one of the rich ruling class then you were acceptable in God's eye's. If you were working class, particularly shepherds or looked after pigs then God had no time for you. But here the father restoring the son him to his place in this rich family and hence to his place in society

Then he puts shoes on his feet. Slaves did not wear shoes, and hence to wear shoes was the sign of being a free man.

Not only does he restore the son to his position in the family, but he then throws a party that evening. Magnificent food is provided and it is a real celebration. No doubt with lots of music and dancing. I wonder whether there music was of the very loud variety. Seems to me that when you go to wedding receptions today, the music either from a DJ or band is extremely loud. But then maybe I'm getting a bit old and square. But the father throws the party of all parties.

But finally in the story we see the re-action of the older brother. He stays outside and basically sulks. His father tries to get him to come in and he whines about having worked faithfully and obediently for the father. He points out that he has not squandered all that money, some of it on prostitutes. Though there is no evidence in the story that the younger brother did loose any money that way. The older brother is just being very critical of the younger brother and his actions. The older brother is very angry that he hasn't had a party like this with a feast of food being provided. The father reminds him that the older brother is always with the father, and all he has is his. But the father says to the older brother in justification, ["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."](#)¹

Interestingly we are not told in the story whether the older brother did have a change of heart and went in to join in the father's party.

This parable, I believe, is one of the most moving ones in the new testament. It speaks to our hearts of the father's love. Maybe as I said at the beginning it should be called, 'the father's love'.

¹ Luke 15:32



We first need to see ourselves as the lost son. Before we became Christians we were in a far country, far away from God the father. We were poor and hungry. Well maybe as we have lived in England in the 20th and now the 21st century, we were relatively well off. We lived in nice houses with food to eat. But we were poor and hungry in the things that really mattered. Isaiah says:

“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 your soul will delight in the richest of fare.”

Isaiah 55:1 - 2 NIV

I trust that all of us here know in our hearts the satisfaction of knowing what it is to be accepted by God. We need to sometimes picture God throwing his arms around us and giving us a big hug. Of hearing him saying with real excitement and joy, look this son or daughter of mine who was lost is now found. To imagine God putting a ring on our finger that shows that we are truly a member of his family. With all the authority that gives us as his sons and daughters. We need to feel him wrapping a lovely magnificent robe around us to restore us to our true position of value in his kingdom. To see him putting on our feet shoes that show we are not slaves, but truly in Jesus his son we are free. Remember Jesus said:

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:36 NIV

Do you enjoy that sense of freedom that only Jesus can give? Sometime when I walk through Chelmsford on a Saturday morning and I see all the people that are busy doing all their shopping, I just say to myself, 'thank you Jesus for setting me free'. I am free to enjoy walking through Chelmsford and doing some shopping. But I am not a slave to it. I don't have to get all intense and pressurised about it.

Do we realise that we are invited to the party the Father throws for all of us in his house. A Christian once said, 'All the best parties are in the Father's house'.

Do we think of these times of when we come together, as being in the Father's house in his party? Is there any excitement in the way we come together as church and worship God? At the end of the parable of the lost sheep Jesus said:

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Luke 15:7 NIV

The church is that place where we the sheep that were lost are now found. We are the sinners that hopefully have repented. If we listen with our inspired imagination, we might here the angels joining in the rejoicing that is taking place. Are our churches places where there is that sense of excitement, joy and rejoicing over the lost being found by coming to know God and be known by him.



I wonder why so many of our churches are shrinking in terms of numbers. Is it because there is no sense in attending the Father's party in his house on a Sunday morning. Do we hear the heavenly music of the angels rejoicing, as they join there singing to ours.

I wonder whether we are radiating the Father's love. If we know what it is to be truly loved by the Father, as shown by the father in this story. Who despite the fact that we as people have made poor choices, and sometime gone into a far country. When we return, he doesn't criticize; he doesn't speak harshly to us; No he throws his arms around us and gives us a great big hug. He says I love you. My son or daughter who was lost has come home. Let's rejoice, let's have a party.

One of the problems, is that I sometimes feel I am more like the older brother. When I grew up, I attended a Sunday school in a congregational church. During my teenage years, I didn't rebel and leave the church. It was during this period, through hearing Billy Graham, that I made a firm commitment to follow Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. I have served God, particularly through preaching in recent years. So it would be easy for me to say like the older brother:

All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Luke 15:29b NIV

Sometimes in many of our churches people act as if they are saved by what they do. If we are not careful, we picture God at the end of our lives, with a pair of scales. In one side is all the good we have done, and the other the wrong things we have done. We hope that the good will out-weigh the bad and we will be accepted by God.

But God accepts us by grace. A person once said, '*Christian often sing lies*'. For it so easy to sing the words and not really accept them in our hearts. Rock of Ages is one of those powerful classic hymns. In it we sing:

Not the labour of my hands
Can fulfil Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone:
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly:
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.



We sing 'Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. But the story of the Prodigal Son reminds us that the Father's response when we come empty handed and naked, is to through his arms of love around us. He puts a robe or righteousness about us, shoes of freedom on our feet, and a family ring which declares we are his children on our finger.

I wonder whether we sometimes express attitudes like the older brother to others in church rather than the Father's heart attitude.

Suppose a drug addict or a tramp became a Christian and came into our church just as they were when they came to know Jesus. Would we welcome them like the father. Would we throw our arms around them and give them a hug?

But remember in the story the father, as a picture of God the Father, throws his arms around, even though the son was smelling of pigs and was no doubt covered in dirt.

May we not be like the older brother, but may we capture the Father's heart of love. Let us open our own hearts to hear the Father's words of love and acceptance that he speaks over us. To capture some of the excitement of the heavenly party that takes place in his place.

Then we will be a church that not only reaches out the lost, but we will truly welcome them into our company. Maybe our services will have more and atmosphere of a party. I don't necessarily mean we have to have lively modern music. Though if we did use more lively music in church we might find that younger people relate to our worship more easily. What I mean more is that a church we know the Father's heart of love for ourselves. That we know we are fully accepted and fully restored into his family as sons and daughters. That in the light of this, we sense the rejoicing of the heavenly party in the Father's house and that his is radiated when we come together as a church on Sunday mornings.²

But one of the things that will change us is when we realise the Father love us just as we are. That we are prodigals that have come home We haven't earned his love by being good. He not only throws his arms around us and restores us to his family but putting shoes on our feet, a ring on our finger and a magnificent robe of Jesus righteousness around us. But he invites us to join in his amazing party. Do you know the Father's love in your heart and are you joining in the party, this morning.

I would like to sing a song I have written called Prodigal, or if you like the Father's love. It is my testimony song, because I am a prodigal that has come back home into the Father's arms of love.

² Number of words: 3i36 – Time approx 25+ minutes.