

Dalziel St. Andrew's Parish Church : Motherwell

Sunday 5th February 2012

Luke 15: 11-32

Admittedly, we didn't read them tonight, but verses 1-2 of Luke 15 summarise what this series entitled, "***Come Dine with Christ***," is truly about: "*Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear Him (that is, Jesus). But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'*"

The establishment of His day was unhappy that Christ broke bread with the riff-raff of society. Jesus answered them by telling three parables – *the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son*. It is the final part of this trilogy we will focus on for a few moments together – normally called ***the parable of the prodigal son!***

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy spent the first part of the movie trying to find a way to escape her humdrum existence down on the farm with aunt Em and uncle Henry. When she winds up in Oz, she spends the rest of the film trying to find a way back home to Kansas. Finally, she learns the truth that she always had the ability to go home anytime she wanted to. All she had to do was click the heels of her ruby slippers together three times and say, "*There's no place like home.*" In this parable, Jesus speaks about a young man who couldn't wait to get away from home. He makes a very selfish demand of his father, takes his inheritance and heads out to a far country to live it up, free from the restraints of his parents. What he finds in the far country is not what he expected. Oh, there were some good times and a few new friends but, when his money ran out, the good times and new friends ran out too. He ends up working day-by-day feeding the pigs. He is broke, lonely and no one cares about him! When he finally reaches rock bottom, he comes to his senses and remembers how good things were at home, and returns there with a plan to ask for a job as a servant in his father's house. But, he got more than he deserved, rediscovering that there really is no place like home!

I've read loads of commentaries on this parable and heard preachers teach on it many times. Many folk tend to concentrate on the emotions and experience of the younger son; his selfishness and the specifics of his sin whilst in the wilderness. However, properly taken in context, I believe that the real focus ought to be twofold - the father's response to his son's homecoming and the older brother's reaction. The first is forgiving, the second downright Pharisaical! In emphasising these things, Jesus was throwing down the gauntlet to his hearers who were harshly judging those with whom He chose to socialise. Contrasting the warmth of welcome afforded by the father with the stinging criticism of the older brother, Christ is effectively saying, "*You Pharisees and teachers of the law are akin to the elder brother in the parable – and, it's not a pretty sight!*"

Listen again to how exuberantly and yet humbly the father welcomes back his younger son: "*...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 around him and kissed him...he 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.'*" (20-24)

Notice that even when Jesus wasn't eating with others, He was teaching about it. And, the foundation for this feast was grace, grace, and more grace! The welcome this wayward lad received was fit for a king, for a V.I.P. And, remember, this was someone who had deeply offended his father by presumptuously requesting his inheritance there and then – equivalent to saying that he wished his father were dead, so he could have his share NOW!

Some might say that it must have taken considerable restraint on the part of the parent to forgive and restore his son to a place of honour. I suspect not. You see, he loved him; it's what parents do! It all depends on your focus. What is important to the father in this parable is the happiness of his child, not demanding his own rights, or looking for some recompense to redress the balance.

And that, my friends, is where the father differs from his eldest son, who takes the opportunity to vent his wrath on his younger sibling. No doubt, during the time when the prodigal was off having fun, the older brother was seething and plotting what he might do if he ever got the chance to give him a piece of his mind.

“The older 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.’” (28-29)

The older lad was not a happy chappy – resentment, jealousy, bitterness, rage; all of these, which had been simmering under the surface, now exploded like a volcano and poured out of his mouth in a stream of vitriol that could not be stemmed by his father’s appeals to him. And, while we may have some sense of sympathy for the elder brother (feeling that he may have a point in asserting that he has been taken for granted), it still does not take away from the bilious pronouncements he makes, which show him to be no less selfish than his younger brother had been at the first!

The prodigal may have been the black sheep, but the elder brother displayed the fact that he had a black heart. Each was culpable in different ways. Both needed to open their hearts to the father’s love. And, that father’s embrace was offered freely to two sons.

You may have noticed that the story ends rather abruptly and we never discover how the older son responds to the invitation laid before him by his father to come and join the party! I find that really intriguing. What did he do – did he change his mind, or did he walk away? Sadly, we cannot be certain!

However, what the whole parable does do is totally affirm the father’s unconditional and unreserved love for both sons – the one who was faithful over many years, and the one who was not. The father’s concern for his offspring was real and had little regard for whether they deserved it or not.

When you think about it, it’s pretty obvious how this parable speaks to us today. For example, if you identify with the prodigal son, then no matter what you’ve done, no matter how far you’ve strayed, no matter what poor choices you’ve made, God (the Father) loves you and wants nothing more than for you to come home. There’s no need to be ashamed; all is forgiven. God’s loving arms are wide open to you, He runs towards you desperate to adorn you with the finest robe and welcome you to His table. On the other hand, if you identify with the older brother, the story says that your good works have not gone unnoticed. God’s message to you is simply, *“Well done, my good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master.”* (Mt. 25:21)

The Good News is that the LORD loves both the righteous and the sinner, and wants us to love one another and be reconciled to each other. And there’s the rub; since it is a lot simpler for those who’ve screwed up to admit their mistakes, make amends and be forgiven than it is for those who have played by the rules through the years, kept their noses clean and done little wrong, to enter into a party atmosphere. Stalwart members who are the pillars of the church can become so entrenched in faithful obedience that we forget to celebrate the power and presence of the God Who forgives.

The message and gift of Christ is for all. If you’re a prodigal and you’ve strayed from the fold, come home. And, if you’re one of the faithful who has become embittered and angry with a God you perceive to be soft on sinners, you come home, too.

The LORD has prepared a barbeque of fatted calf for **ALL** of those who will respond in faith to His gracious invitation!