

25 August 2019: The prodigals (Luke 15: 11-32)

The Pharisees just couldn't understand Jesus. They had such a skewed idea of God. They thought that the only way to please God was to obey all his rules. And here was Jesus, who dirtied himself by mixing with the wrong people, who didn't obey every detail of the laws drawn up over the centuries.

So try to make things clearer for them, Jesus told this story:

Once there was a young man who got bored living at home. He begged his father to give him whatever inheritance had been set aside for him and once he had got this, set off without a backward glance to enjoy himself. For all he cared his father might as well be dead! He was young, adventurous and had plenty of money so he made lots of friends, although many of these were just parasites staying with him because they wanted to share his money and his parties. It was expensive paying for parties and pleasures and his money disappeared fast. Soon he was bankrupt – with no money and no friends and, of course, no home to go to. And to make it worse the rains hadn't come and there was drought so food was scarce and expensive. As a result, the only job he could get was looking after the pigs – a smelly job for anyone and a terrible job for a Jew. (Jews were not supposed to have anything to do with pigs.) The job didn't pay well and he was always hungry and miserable. He even tried to eat the pig's food (swill).

One day he got really fed up with this lifestyle. He realised that his home hadn't been so bad and that he had been the one who had messed up. He decided to return to his father's home and ask for work as a labourer for his father. At least his dad's workers had sufficient food. He knew what he had to say to his father: "Dad, I messed up. I wasted your money and did things you really wouldn't approve of. I don't expect you to take me back as your son. Could I work on the farm as a labourer, however? That will be a better life than I have had for a while."

But he never got to say everything in that speech. When he was a long way off from his home, he saw a man running along the road in his direction. It was his father, running to greet him. His father had missed him all the time he was away and had watched out for him. I imagine the father squinting at the horizon every so often, hoping his son would be visible there. Imagine his excitement as he recognised his son's walk.

The father greeted him with open arms. The young man only got as far as apologising. He didn't even get a chance to offer to be a paid labourer and not a son. Instead from the beginning the father treated him as a beloved son. He called out to his servants to run a bath for his son, to bring a decent outfit for his son to wear and to set about organising a party to celebrate his return.

This sounds very like the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin. But this story doesn't end there. Mid-way through the celebration party, this young man's older brother heard the noise and came to see what was going on. He was shocked to see that his brother had returned and that his return was being celebrated. In his anger, he muttered that his Dad had never given a party for him! However, his father had the last word: "You are special and

you will own everything on the farm one day; but join us today so we can celebrate that this son whom I feared was dead and lost for ever has come back home.”

That story is called the story of the Prodigal Son. Prodigal is an old word which isn't used much today. It means 'wasteful or extravagant'. And yes the younger son was 'extravagant' but the father was also 'extravagant' in his own way! He was extravagant in his love, never giving up on either son, loving them both.

Jesus explained that God loves us just like that father loved his sons. He loved the one when he was a good boy at home; he loved him when he asked for money, wishing his father were dead so he could get a big share of his possessions; he loved him when he went off and did stupid things; and he loved him so much that he held a party for the boy who had embarrassed him. And he loved the other even though he was grumpy and jealous.

God doesn't only love the obedient. Jesus' message is simply that God will always love us. We can never 'drift beyond his love and care'. However, once the boy had experienced his father's love, I can't believe he let him down again. If we really recognise that God loves us so much that he came to die in our place on that terrible cross, we will always be grateful and show our gratitude by living as he wants us to do.

Let's not be grumpy and mean like the older brother! Let's learn from the father and be extravagant in our love.