

Jesus said: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Soon after, that son got together all he had, set off for a distant country where he squandered his wealth in wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

But 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. The son said 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father 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 feast and celebrate.

The older brother was angry and refused to go into the house. 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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.'"

## Reflection:

Jesus had been receiving criticism from the Pharisees, one of the three major religious groups within Judaism at that time. This group of people had an almost unparalleled zeal for God and dedicated themselves to following the religious law to its very letter. What appalled and horrified them was that Jesus, a teacher, someone who they could see was special and holy, was "polluting himself" by spending time with and eating with people who the Pharisees regarded as being "sinners". Jesus answered his critics in a way he often did - by telling them a story ó the story we've just heard - a story about our failings and, more importantly, about God's goodness.

The story begins with this younger son demanding his share of the estate from his Father. Could you imagine telling your parents that you couldn't wait for them to die and that you want to receive the contents of their will **now**? Well, that is what this son did. This young man then takes everything he has and moves as far away from his family as he can get. Imagine how all these things would have hurt the father, but even so, the father gives him freedom ó even if the son uses the freedom to reject him...

After a couple of wild years, it's all gone wrong. The young man has no money, no property and the people who he previously called öfriendsö are nowhere to be seen. He takes a job looking after someone's pigs - an unpleasant job for most people, but for a Jew it was doubly revolting as pigs were considered to be ritually unclean. The son eventually comes to his senses and realises that he would be better off working for his father as a servant than slowly starving to death in a foreign country.

In Psalm 84 it says:

*"Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of*

*the wicked."*

What's interesting here is the son's motivation. Was he sorry he had hurt his father? Well, probably...but that isn't what drives him back, though. He heads back to his father because he knows that with him he'll be looked after. There he'll be safe.

Next we hear one of the most beautiful passages of scripture: The father doesn't even wait until the boy arrives at the house! We're told that while he was little more than just a dot on the horizon, "his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him". Now remember that the last job this boy had was looking after pigs...and I don't think his smell would have been improved by the long journey home on foot! But even so, the father hugs him and kisses him.

On the way home the son would no doubt have been preparing the little speech he was going to make to his father ("*Father, I've sinned against heaven and you...*"), but when he arrives he doesn't even get a chance to finish saying it because his father is so busy organising gifts for him: the best robe, a ring and sandals - all of which would show the world that **this** boy was **his** son. Only slaves went barefoot, free men wore sandals. The best robe showed the riches of the family to which he belonged. The signet ring showed the authority he had as the father's son. And although I'm sure he had some great parties whilst he was in that foreign country, I'm sure they didn't compare with the joy he felt at being back home with his father and the smell of roasting meat in the air.

This is a beautiful story. The title given to this parable is often "The Prodigal Son", but I think "The Loving Father" might perhaps be a better title as that is what this story is really about. The father represents God/Jesus and the younger son represents the "sinners" Jesus had been hanging out with. This story tells of God's goodness, his forgiveness and how **anyone** is welcomed back whatever, **what-ever**, they've done...if

they simply turn back to Him and return to home.

In Romans 8 it says:

*"neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God"*

And the best part of this story is that we are included! We are **also** the younger brother and **we too** can return home to the Father.

But the parable doesn't end here though... We still have the matter of the older brother. In most talks I've heard about this passage, I always feel that the older brother gets rather harsh treatment. You have to admit he had a point! How would **you** feel if a younger sibling disgraced your family, hurt your father, raided the family silver only to go and spend it all and then come back "cap in hand"? **No wonder** the older son was angry. **No wonder** he no longer regarded him as his brother, only referring to him as "this **son of yours**". In human terms, the older son had a valid case. He wanted to see the younger son **punished**. He wanted to see **justice** done.

But here is the point Jesus was trying to get across. **This** is exactly what is so amazing about "amazing grace": it is undeserved, it is not earned and it is freely given ó it just has to be accepted. The younger son **had** done some terrible things, but it didn't matter to the father: he was just so pleased to have him back safe and sound: "this **brother of yours** was dead and is alive again" If it didn't matter to the father, it shouldn't have mattered to the older son.

In this story, the older brother represents the Pharisees, who were complaining about the company Jesus had been keeping. They were resentful of the generosity this holy man was extending to people who simply did not deserve Him. Jesus should have been paying attention to **them** - people who were öholyö, who had been seeking after God and

keeping his commands...not foreigners, prostitutes, tax collectors and thieves.

Jesus didn't just tell beautiful stories, he told stories which made people uncomfortable and challenged their prejudices. What makes this a hard story to listen to is that the modern-day Pharisees can easily be people who go to church and call themselves "Christians". As soon as I start thinking of a person or a group of people as "inferior", "sinners" or "disreputable" I have put myself in the position of Judge and Jury and I am on very shaky ground. There are only a few perilous steps between righteousness and self-righteousness.

We will shortly be spending some time in silence and you can spend some time in prayer or simply in stillness. However, if you would like something to ponder, consider this: Which son am I more like? Chances are that I'm a little bit like both...

Am I like the older brother, resentful of God's blessing on others whom I deem unworthy. Do I consider myself "better" and "more deserving" than others? Do I put myself in the position of Judge and Jury? Have I forgotten that **I** too rely on God's goodness? It might be time to pray for forgiveness and grace.

Or Am I like the younger brother? Have I turned away from the Father and done my own thing? This may be in its totality or in a particular aspect of my life where I have demanded that **my** will be done, rather than His. It might be time to pray for forgiveness and grace. It might be time to turn our faces towards home, **sure** in the knowledge that we won't even be able to make it to the front door before we've been forgiven and we're being embraced by the one who loves us most of all.

*"We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found"*