

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

THE TWO SONS

Some of the best known parables are recorded only by Luke; the Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of them (Luke 15.11–32). It is easily remembered - the story of a rake made good. Judged by the popular press, these stories are well received; they seem to strike a sympathetic chord - maybe we recognise in them a bit of ourselves. But reading them in the paper keeps them at a safe distance; we don't really have to get involved.

But the parable does not end with the prodigal's return. It goes on to tell us about the elder son, the son who had stayed at home and who had done his duty. He did not read the story in the paper; he was involved. For him his brother's plight did not evoke sympathy, and his return did not bring rejoicing. For the elder son the party to celebrate his brother's return was unfair.

Although the action of the parable focusses on the younger son, with the elder as a sort of sub-plot, the subject of the parable is the father, and the relationship which each son has with him. Jesus didn't tell the story to reassure us that a bit of loose living, laddish behaviour, a bit on the side..., will be overlooked, never mind the offence it causes to those who keep to the straight and narrow; Jesus told the story to help us get our picture of God sorted out. God, he is saying, is like the father in the parable; and what a marvellous picture that is: loving and forgiving towards the younger son: 'Let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was lost and is found.' But no less loving towards the elder: 'You are always with me, and all

that is mine is yours.' And heaven, Jesus says, is like a party, a great rejoicing, as at a homecoming.

What a contrast this positive picture of God makes with the more common negative images where God is seen as stern, unforgiving, unamused. It is important to get our picture of God right because so much depends upon it - not just the way we treat the world and other people, but perhaps most importantly, the way we treat ourselves. William Temple said that it was better not to believe than to believe in the wrong picture of God. David Ford in his Lent book *The Shape of Living* makes the same point: a friend, who had been a Roman Catholic priest for twenty years, said that the most common problem he met in hearing confessions was God. Very few people really behaved as though God were a God of love, forgiveness, gentleness and compassion. 'Their biggest barrier is a God seen as being very different from the God of Jesus, who welcomes home the Prodigal Son with an embrace and a party. They cannot believe that God values them, delights in them, suffers for them, is interested in the detail of their lives, has a way through their particular sins and difficulties, and has a calling for them.'

We may find it hard to believe, but there is no doubt that Jesus is saying that God is just like that. He does value us, delight in us, suffer for us, is interested in every detail of our lives, has a way through our sins and difficulties, and has a calling for us. That is how it is. No wonder St Paul could write 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; behold, everything has become new! (2 Cor 5.17)

What is on offer from God is a new relationship, a close personal relationship of rejoicing; an embrace and a party, just like the younger son enjoyed on his return home. And, most important of all, God's offer does not depend upon us coming up to the mark. The younger son wasn't exactly long on good works, he rejected all that his father had taught him, and his personal life was a mess. In the moral stakes his score was zero. Most people have at least a few points! But too often we can't quite take God at face value and believe that he wants to make a fuss over us, to throw a party for us. Our relationship with God tends to be more like the relationship we might have with the Queen: respectful, obedient, even affectionate, but not really personal, always a bit distant, waiting for her to make the first move.

The personal newness in Christ of which St Paul writes is possible because God has made the first move. He made that move in Christ through whom he overcame all the barriers which separate us from himself. 'In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.' (2 Cor 5.19) All we have to do is to turn to him with open arms, desiring the closeness which he also desires, and we shall find him running towards us as did the younger son.

Its much easier for those who have nothing to lose to do this, like many of the first Christians. But in later generations, where people have been Christians from birth, and, like the elder son, have always enjoyed their father's favour, a more respectful relationship has developed. Perhaps, like the elder son we find it hard to ask for time to celebrate, and find it easier to give our lives to good works. While

we know that God is always with us, maybe it is more believed than felt, and God's assurance that 'all that is mine is yours' somehow does not liberate us into new life.

The elder son may not have left his father's house, but it was not enough simply to stay at home and do his duty. He too needed to change, to draw closer to his father. Somehow he needed to open his eyes to see himself as he really was. Actually the situation of the two sons is surprisingly similar. Both were consumed with themselves: one through debauchery the other through duty. The difference was that one came to realise what his self-indulgence was doing to him and the other did not. The misery to which the younger son was reduced opened his eyes and led him to a change of heart, to repentance. Because he turned round he saw his father in a new way, as someone who delighted in him, who forgave him, and thus he came to a new, close relationship with his father, and they had a party. But the envy which seized the elder son kept his eyes closed; he saw no need to change; in his eyes his father remained demanding and remote; his relationship with his father remained the same.

It is of course much easier to see the need for repentance if our life is in a mess; it comes hard to be told that our goodness may be our problem. But the good is often the enemy of the best. Even good people need to turn around and reach out for the best; to a new, close relationship with God. The father's love for the elder son was just as great as for the younger. He came in search of him too, and entreated him to join the party. And that is where the story ends. But Jesus leaves us with a big question: Did he go?