



HAMILTON 2009

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“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 to him, “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be your son.” But the father said to his servant, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattest 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.” So they began to celebrate.”
Luke 15:11-32, esp. 20-24

This has surely got to be the most exciting and amazing story ever told. It’s my favourite by far. The heart of the Christian faith is expounded here in story form.

I’m simply going to tell the story this morning. I know you’ve heard it before. I hope many times. But good stories can be told again and again.

Once upon a time there lived in a certain village a father and his two sons. The whole story is about relationships, the relationship of these three characters to each other.

One day the younger son struts up to his father and says, **FATHER, GIVE ME MY SHARE OF THE PROPERTY NOW.**

Father, I want my freedom. I want to be independent. I can’t go on living like this any more. I can’t stand these orders you dish out all the time. You treat me like a kid.

My dear boy, do you really think you have no freedom? You’re my son, my child, my heir. You can come and go as you like. I love you and I give you your daily bread.

And the son explodes, To be quite honest with you, Dad, I don’t care two hoots about any of those things. For me freedom means being able to do what I want, not what you want. I’m clearing out. **GIVE ME MY SHARE OF THE INHERITANCE NOW.**

And in saying that he was really saying straight out to his father, ‘Drop dead, Dad’. Because that was the only way he could get his father’s inheritance which he was asking for. ‘Drop dead, Dad’.

And his father does. He gives him his inheritance, which he’s entitled to only after his father’s death.

The son’s request is in accordance with the law. He’s not breaking the law. He’s breaking his father’s heart. He’s breaking a relationship.

So off he goes with his father's money in his pocket. His father's money, mind you.

But it's soon gone. Squandered. Wasted. That's why he's called the prodigal son, the wasteful son.

And so he finishes up with the pigs, the lowest form of humiliation for a Jewish lad. He was desperate. He seeks pleasure and finds pain. He seeks freedom and gets bondage. Our world of today all over, isn't it?

If his father were computer literate he could send his son an email and say, Son, why don't you come back home? I love you. I want you back. Why won't you come back?'

And the son gets out his mobile, phones his dad and says, Dad, you know darn well. There are at least two reasons which stop me coming back home, certainly as your son.

1. I can't face my brother's scorn. Let me be quite frank with you, Dad – that's the real reason I moved out in the first place. I can't stand my brother. He's a proud prig. I know that my estrangement from him is keeping me from fellowship with you. But that's how it is.
2. And the second reason is that I can't face the village. I know that I've broken my relationship with the village community by what I've done. I've brought scorn upon myself and can't face them.

But you know what? **AT LAST HE CAME TO HIS SENSES.**

I'll go back home. Even the servants there are better off than I am here. But I won't go back as a son. If I do, I'll have to relate to my brother. I'll go back as a servant. That way I'll be able to make up for what I've done. I can redeem myself through honourable work.

So off he goes, hoping for a servant-master arrangement with his father. He doesn't yet see that he's broken a relationship, not just a law. He hasn't faced the problem of mending his father's broken heart nor does it enter his thinking. In his thinking, if he can return the money and make up, all will be fine.

But things don't work out as the son expects them to. According to all expectations the son should grovel his way through the village to his father and then be punished.

Instead **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.**

His father **RAN**. No Middle Eastern gentleman would ever run in public. In order to run, he had to gather up his robes and expose his undergarments and legs. This was a great shame in that culture. The father, therefore, exposes himself to shame. You see what he is doing? He wants the ire of the villagers to shift from his son to him, exposing himself to shame.

In a humiliating public demonstration the father takes upon himself the form of a servant and runs down the village street to his son. He wants to reach the son before

his son reaches the village. He wants the scorn of the village to be transferred from the son to him, the father. It is a costly demonstration of unexpected love.

HIS HEART AS FILLED WITH PITY. COMPASSION.

Compassion! (splanchnizomai) is a term used in the New Testament with only one exception exclusively of God. But this is the very point, the very heart and essence of the story.

This is the heart of God. This is what God is like. The father really symbolizes God incarnate.

There was the father, racing out, earning public humiliation and scorn, to welcome back the prodigal. That's the heart of God. We have here the image of the running God. God running in public. How humiliating.

There was the father, kissing his son, embracing him, subjecting himself to scorn. That's the heart of God.

There was the father, throwing a party, rejoicing. **MY SON WAS LOST AND NOW IS FOUND.** Whoopee! That's the heart of God.

There was the father putting the best robe on his son, giving him a ring for his finger. The ring gives him authority in managing the family fortune. Here is the father giving him shoes. Shoes! A slave went barefoot. A son was given shoes. That's the heart of God.

The son didn't even get a chance to make his declaration, saying that he would come back as a slave. The father cuts him off. So the son makes a confession of unworthiness in the light of the father's demonstration of love.

The central thing in this story is not the prodigal son but the loving father, Jesus is telling us. And he's telling it to us to tell us what God is like. That's the heart of God.

Only this reconciliation puts things right and provides the proper motive for the son's future relationship with his father. He will now serve his father with a glad and willing heart. He won't work for the hope of a reward. Now if he's working in the field long after closing time and someone asks, 'Why are you trying to impress your father? What do you want from the old man now?', he replies, 'You haven't heard my story? If you had you wouldn't ask that'.

Only sonship brings the right attitude and motivation for Christian living and Christian service.

The older son is also characterized by revolt. He, too, is a rebel.

He refuses to go into the feast in honour of his brother because custom demands that he serves – and serves especially honoured guests. That means he would have to serve his hated brother. Everyone expects him to do so. Refusal to do this is a public insult to his father. This is now an open rupture in his relationship with his father, not just a hidden one.

His rebellion is just as serious as that of the younger son. The only difference is that he is camouflaging it by staying at home in his father's house. He lives in his father's house, but he doesn't have the relationship of a son to his father. **LOST IN THE FATHER'S HOUSE!**

Now again the village custom demands that the son should be punished for this open defiance of his father, for his refusal to go in and serve.

But for the second time that day the father demonstrates a willingness to endure shame and self-emptying in order to reconcile. **HIS FATHER CAME OUT AND BEGGED HIM TO COME IN.** (parakaleo – paraclete – condescension) Never done! Shock reverberates through the banquet hall when his father deliberately leaves his guests, humiliates himself publicly before all, and goes out into the courtyard to plead with his older son. The father obviously loves both sons indiscriminately.

The father, of course, could bring the boy in and beat him. But this would cause even greater bitterness and estrangement. If he overlooks the incident, he is finished as a father. The son would then try something even more radical the next time.

The father does the only thing that can be done. Indeed, isn't this the only thing a loving God could do with sinful, rebellious humanity?

But the son refuses. He refuses!!!

- 1 He refuses to recognize his brother as his brother. **THIS SON OF YOURS.**
- 2 He refuses to be reconciled to his brother. His unwillingness to be reconciled to his brother forces him to break his relationship with his father.
- 3 He refuses partnership with his father.
- 4 He refuses a father-son relationship, opting instead for a master-servant relationship.

And his refusal is a nasty piece of work at that. But his father by-passes the omission of a title, the bitterness, the arrogance, the distortion of fact, the sarcasm, the unjust accusations. There is no judgement, no criticism, no rejection, but rather only an outpouring of love.

My SON. O my boy, my dear child. **YOU ARE ALWAYS WITH ME HERE AND EVERYTHING I HAVE IS YOURS. BUT WE HAD TO CELEBRATE AND BE HAPPY BECAUSE YOUR BROTHER WAS DEAD, BUT IS NOW ALIVE. HE WAS LOST BUT NOW HAS BEEN FOUND.**

Very gently the father corrects only one point as he reminds him that the prodigal as **YOUR BROTHER.** The rest of the speech is a defence of joy. The whole of Luke 15 is told as a defence of joy – joy, rejoicing, celebrating over the finding of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son.

And this is the end of the story.

But it isn't the end. Everyone awaits the response of the older brother – the final response, the response to the good news of the father's love, the response to the gospel and its acceptance that Jesus is talking about in Luke 15.

In other words, the parable is open-ended. We don't know the response of the older brother to his father's demonstration of love, his pleading.

We know the initial response to the first appeal of his father. But the last words in the story belong to the father. **LOOK, DEAR SON. YOU AND I ARE VERY CLOSE, AND EVERYTHING I HAVE IS YOURS. WE HAD TO CELEBRATE THIS HAPPY DAY. FOR THIS BROTHER OF YOURS WAS DEAD AND HE IS ALIVE AGAIN; HE WAS LOST AND IS FOUND.**

We don't know the older son's final response to this outpouring of love for both sons, for all people.

The audience must finish the story. You must finish the story.

How do we respond to the father's invitation? The scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus tells the story, end the story by killing Jesus. What shall we do with Jesus? What is our response to the good news?

God says to us through the story:

You were dead and now you are alive.

You were lost and now you are found.

You were alienated and now you are invited to the reconciliation banquet.

The God of great love awaits the honour of your response, of your reply.

R.S.V.P