

## **The Lost Son – Meditation on Luke 15: 11-32**

Our story today is through and through a love story which tells us of seeking, losing and finding.

Jesus tells it as an answer to his critics who take offence at him. They criticize his relationship to what they think are the wrong people. They don't like to see his compassion and love for those who they think don't have the right to be close to a teacher of God.

A teacher of God should be able to distinguish between clean and unclean, the Pharisees and scribes claimed. And the folk Jesus made friends with, definitely were unclean.

Jesus' relationship to the poor, the outcast, the wretched, was a thorn in the Pharisees' eyes. How could he shamelessly eat and drink with them, celebrate and discuss with them?

To answer this question, Luke, the evangelist, presents to us a Jesus who tells the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and of the father and the two sons. He tells his story in a culture of poverty. The major part of the population was starving and being enslaved. The story of the lost son takes place on a prosperous farm, which employed slaves and day labourers who were without rights and protection.

As usual the older son was the heir of the farm. He would inherit the whole estate. And as usual the younger son had his legacy paid out in advance as cash. He didn't have a choice...

This information actually corrected my long-preserved image of the prodigal son: I always thought of him as being bored and greedy and wanting to leave home for fun and distraction.

Now I see that what he did, was just the usual thing to do: leave your home. This is what younger brothers had to do.

They got their part of the inheritance and left home in the hope that they could buy themselves some land somewhere, and maybe marry into a family.

This wasn't all that easy. And unfortunately not all younger sons succeeded in doing this, either because, as in the parable, they dealt carelessly with their money, or because one of

the constantly happening famines drove up the price of corn and bread, and in a flash those who didn't own property found themselves beggars.

Studying the text carefully and seeing the time and the context in which it was told, shows us that the departure of the younger son from home was normal in village life, and was not a break with the family.

Don't you think, too, that this puts the young man in quite a different position from what over the centuries has been interpreted and composed and painted about him?

When it comes to the worst in the story, he hires himself out as a swineherd. He falls into the hands of a man who exploits him and cheats him. He is not given the daily portion of food that is usual for herdsmen. He is not even allowed to touch the pigs' food.

The first dramatic turning point in the story is the desperate young man's decision to go home, hoping that he'd be paid at least the wage of a day labourer there. He knows that unlike his older brother, he no longer has any right to live on the farm.

A second important turning in the story is, when the father in the story shows himself as somebody not thinking in clearly and logically legalistic terms.

He seems to be thinking in terms of loving care rather than in what is officially right or wrong.

When he recognises the starving man in rags as his son, we are told that "his heart contracted within him". He is in pain. He feels for this returning family member.

And then this elderly Middle Eastern farmer runs out to meet his son "as fast as he could" – not at all minding all the rules of custom and respectability. The joy is so great, there is no time to reflect or weigh up.

The old father hugs and kisses his son.

He doesn't ask the awkward questions we could imagine: the "What on earth have you been up to?" the "How could you...?" "How dare you...?" "What have you done with all that money?" "Why weren't you more careful?"

He doesn't ask any of these.

Losing and finding are the words the father uses later; and they stand for “being dead and being alive”. And then he shows his son what being alive means: a fatted calf, music and dance, new clothes, a ring with a seal, new rights to the property, singing and rejoicing. The joy and happiness of being together have the first and the last word. “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found,” is what the father says when he holds the returning son in his arms.

Let’s come back to Jesus, the narrator of the story of the father with the two sons.

His interest is not to make people feel small, helpless and broken!

The returning son’s confession “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son...” is nothing he has to say in order to regain his father’s love. The love of the father shown in this story is absolutely unconditional. It is simply what it is.

The forgiveness has no connection with the conditions of repentance and confessing sins. The father’s forgiveness simply raises up someone who has been humiliated enough by life.

The many abundances in the story, the hugs and kisses, the joy, the feast, the food, the drink, the music, the dancing – they all point towards beauty, happiness and the joy of life which God has always wanted for his people.

What happens here is grace – nothing more and nothing less.

What became of the older son is not told in the story. Was he able to agree with his father? Did he manage to accept the return of his younger brother? Could the two reconcile with each other?

Questions which Jesus leaves open.

Jesus, the storyteller and teacher leaves it open to his audience to answer, and he leaves it open to us...

The father’s behaviour towards his two sons also reflects Jesus’ behaviour towards the people around him.

It is a matter of seeking and lacking and meeting.

Remember: the father comes also to meet the older brother. He leaves the feast and invites the brother, who is standing outside, to also come in. He asks him “to make merry and be glad.”

Joy is the theme - not sin!

Joy is what we are invited to look at, not concentrating on the sins of ourselves or others.

The theological statement of Jesus’ story, is what the father says about his son in his last sentence: “He was dead and he is alive.”

While being away from the father, the land, the sources of life, the company of friends and family, the younger son could not live. He was dead. Back within his “community” he finds new life...

Here the story does not speak of earthly fathers and families of origin. It speaks of our relationship to God and our human longing for companions and friends.

The story of the prodigal son is a love story between God and his people.

The relationship between the two brothers in the story is open...

It invites us to imagine what could have happened. It lets us hope that the two brothers became real and true friends – understanding each other, respecting each other, forgiving and loving each other...

In the response of the waiting parent we discover God’s love for his human beings:

God runs to meet us,

God does not need our confession,

God’s response to us is far more loving and welcoming than we can imagine,

God is filling our lives with nothing else other than sheer grace.

Amen.