

Prodigal God 1: The People around Jesus. Luke 15:1-10

Many of us will be familiar with Luke chapter 15 verses 11-32. Along with the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is perhaps the most famous of the stories with a message which Jesus told.

And most of us know it as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son”. Now, whilst on one level there is nothing wrong with that title because there is certainly a wasteful son in the story, it is worth noting that Jesus himself never gave his parable that title, in fact as we will see in the weeks to come, he actually gives it a very different name altogether.

OK, but why is this series called “The Prodigal God”? Well, I wonder what most of us think the word “prodigal” means? I suspect that really, our definition of “prodigal” is driven solely by this parable and “the prodigal son”. In other words, if this story is about a selfish, wasteful, uncontrolled son, then that’s what “prodigal” must mean.

But actually there is more to the word than that because “prodigal” is an adjective meaning “recklessly extravagant” and “having spent everything”, now, two weeks after we have celebrated Easter – the Son of God selflessly sacrificing himself on the Cross for us and the Father graciously raising him to new and eternal life - don’t you think that “prodigal” is actually a pretty good description of our God; that he is recklessly extravagant having spent everything on us?

Well, that amazing reality is what we are going to be unpacking over the following few weeks; the prodigal God, the God who is recklessly extravagant, the God who spends everything for us.

So, where do we begin? Well, the best place to begin with any story is at the start and because the parable that we are focusing in on is really the third of three stories that Jesus tells,

let's go back to Luke chapter 15 verse 1 and begin at the beginning. "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear [Jesus]. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable:"

Have you been watching the news this week as all the political parties have been launching their manifestos? Who have they been surrounded with? Well, it's not been with real people has it?

Every party has very carefully made sure that their leaders are surrounded by the right people, but as Jesus speaks the religious leaders of his day notice something which concerns them – that Jesus seems to attract and befriend "tax collectors and sinners" – the very people who were the moral outcasts of society, the very people Brown, Cameron and Clegg would not want to be photographed with holding their manifestos.

And verse 2 tells us that the religious leaders began to mutter about this, notice that Luke doesn't tell us that they commented about, or approved of, or were pleased by this – no, they "muttered" "This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them."

What were they saying? Probably something along the lines of, "How dare Jesus welcome sinners – these are the very people who never come to our meetings! Why would they be drawn to him and his teaching? It must be because he tells them what they want to hear! We knew it all along, he can't be calling them to repent or change!"

So, it is in response to this muttering that Jesus tells the three parables in Luke 15 and through those three stories he radically challenges all of his listeners' fundamental assumptions about God, sin and salvation. He gives them an entirely new way of thinking about God, themselves and the whole world.

But, when this text is usually taught its focus is on how the father receives the penitent son. Haven't you read this imagining the eyes of Jesus' original hearers welling up with tears as they heard how God will always love them and welcome them no matter what they have done?

But if that is how we see this parable then we sentimentalise it and take away its true power, because the targets of this story (as we will see over the next few weeks) are not wayward sinners" but religious people; the people who do everything the Bible requires! Jesus is pleading not so much with the immoral outsiders as the moral insiders.

The point is that Jesus' original hearers were not so much touched by Jesus' words as offended because Jesus says that both the irreligious and the religious are spiritually lost.

Now to fully understand what Jesus is saying, we need to hold back on the third parable for a week and today see it in context by looking at the first two parables, so as we do that, let's notice three sets of characters: 1) the unwilling listeners, 2) the lost things, and 3) the joyful seekers.

The unwilling listeners

Now, we have already seen that there are two groups of people around Jesus, but did you notice their different mindset? The first group; the tax collectors and the sinners – well, they want to be there, they are attracted to Jesus' teaching, something draws them and holds them as Jesus speaks.

But then there is the other group – the religious leaders, they aren't there because they want to be, no, they are there to keep an eye on things and on Jesus in particular. They are scandalised at the people who not only turn up, but whom Jesus welcomes. Listen again to their muttering;

“This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.” Big deal? Well, actually, yes it was.

Imagine you or I go to a café and there aren't any places available, but there is someone sat alone at a six-seater table. Let's face it, if push came to shove we would ask if we could sit at his table – even if we were pretty convinced that he was a bit dodgy. Needs must.

But in Jesus' culture you just wouldn't do that. Eating with someone, sharing a meal with them was a very intimate act and it signalled that you accepted a person and were friends with them.

Just as we might ask someone out to a restaurant on a date, or invite friends round for a meal, or have a guest list for a special party meal, the fact that Jesus ate with sinners was a very public sign of friendship and the religious leaders were scandalised by it – didn't Jesus realise that these were “bad people” the very people who were the cause of the problems in the world?

If you want to update it then try something like, “Now the bankers and hoodies and girls who would go out clubbing virtually naked on a Saturday night were all gathering round to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.”

The religious leaders were shocked to the core, they weren't prepared to hear what Jesus was saying because they were too busy criticising the company he kept. And of course the flip side to all this is that in contrast to the people they see gathering around Jesus, the religious leaders regard themselves as the good people, the righteous people, the people who will make the world right, so they set themselves above everything that is going on.

So, the stories here in Luke 15 are designed to challenge the Pharisee's point of view just as much, if not more so than those belonging to the people whom the Pharisees look down on so that by the time we come to the final parable we discover everyone is drawn into the story of God – “religious people” and “sinners”. But before we reach that point we need to discover;

Then there are **The Lost Things**

In the first story that Jesus tells, the shepherd sets out to find the lost sheep, the sheep which has thoughtlessly wandered away and has no clue at all about how to get back.

Then in the second story Jesus tells about a lost object - a coin which has been dropped and rolled away, even more so than the sheep, the coin has no hope of finding its way back, so the woman searches for it.

Then finally in third story Jesus tells us about the son who is lost, the son who has wilfully chosen to leave his father and we will hear more about him next week.

Now all three lost things represent people who are spiritually lost and far away from God. Jesus is characterising the people the Pharisees viewed as sinners and agreeing that they are lost, but lost in different sorts of ways; the sheep is lost through foolishness, the coin through thoughtlessness and the son through wilfulness.

You see, what Jesus is doing is saying that sinners are complex because sin is complex; there is not a one size fits all explanation for sin. Usually people's sins come from a combination of all those areas; sin is inborn in every single one of us, then it is deepened and shaped by our own choices as we go through life.

So by drawing attention to the lost things Jesus is showing the unwilling listeners, the religious teachers that it is simply not acceptable to point to others and condemn them as sinners.

So then, lastly this morning Jesus draws our attention towards the **Joyful seekers**.

Earlier on this week I woke up to a report on the radio and a phrase grabbed my attention - a certain celebrity had “found God” – have you heard that before?

Most people think that’s how it works, that religion is about humanity’s search for God. In other words, that although religions differ, a lot of people would claim that if you are spiritual then you are fundamentally someone who is searching for God and if you search hard enough then you will find him.

Of course that then creates a two tier system doesn’t it? If God can be found by those who search hard enough then surely like the children who find the most chocolate on an Easter egg hunt, those who feel that they have searched for and found God will look down on those who haven’t, especially those who appear to be making no effort at all to find him. People who have “found God” will look at “sinners” and say “I found God! If you try, you can too.”

But the biblical Gospel turns this thinking on its head. The shepherd (whom time and again Jesus identifies himself with) must go out and search for the lost sheep. The coin is totally unable to find anyone and must be searched for and found by the woman of the house and when we come to the final story – well, we shall look at that in the weeks to come.

But suffice to say that you can clearly see that Jesus is saying, “Everything you thought you knew about God is wrong. You think that you can find God, but you can’t, you think that moving

away from sin is something that you do, but it isn't – God comes and searches you out. You have no ability and no power to return to God yourself, you are like a lost sheep and a lost coin (and as we shall see – a lost son) and you are totally dependant on God searching for you and bringing you home.”

You see, a theme which runs through all three of the parables is the joy of finding the lost and that is because God looks at spiritually lost people in a totally different way to the Pharisees.

They looked at “sinners” with distain and disapproval, they felt superior to them, but God looks at the lost and he loves them and longs for them to be with him, he goes out looking for them and he brings them home rejoicing.

What did the ex-slave trader John Newton write in his hymn?

”I once was lost, but then I searched,

Found God and now I'm free.”? No.

“Amazing grace – how sweet the sound –

That saved I wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.”

As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, Jesus “who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame” (Heb 12:2) why? What joy was so great he would endure the horrors of the cross?

Jesus is the joyful shepherd who came down from heaven to find the lost wretches like Newton and you and me, because none of us, in our own sinfulness is able to find God in our own strength. His joy in doing his Father's will and his joy in finding us and bringing us home was so great that he was willing and prepared to endure the cross to achieve it.

So what challenge do we take away this morning? Well, let's go back to the beginning of Luke 15 and the muttered complaint of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. You see, when you read the gospels you will discover that in the main (although not exclusively), religious people – the elder brother types were offended by Jesus, whilst those who were irreligious (the “sinners”) – the younger brother types, were intrigued and attracted to him hence Jesus says to the religious leaders in Matthew 21:31 “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

Now, look around you – what's wrong with this picture?

Quite clearly our churches today do not have the same effect that Jesus did. Our churches in the main are regarded as the bastions of religion and morals and the kind of outsiders Jesus attracted are not attracted to our churches – we tend to attract “nice”, conservative, moralistic people and the younger brother types tend to avoid our churches and that can mean only one thing; in the words of Tim Keller, “If the preaching of our ministers and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did. If our churches aren't appealing to younger brothers, they must be more full of elder brothers than we'd like to think.”

So, our challenge is this; Are we ready to hear that everything that we believed about God is wrong? Are we ready to see and address our own elder-brotherness and are we ready to become a church which teaches and lives out the same message as Jesus and so becomes a place to which sinners are drawn and where they are welcomed by the God who has sought them out?

If you are, then come back next week.