

The prodigal son and God's forgiveness



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Luke 15:32

“It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found. ”



It has been said of Jesus that in all of history He was the master Teacher of the Ages, the best of them all. (See <https://ballaratanglican.org.au>storyteller>)

Above all others, Jesus had the gift of telling simple stories which not only captured people's attention and was easily remembered by them, but which conveyed **deep and profoundly meaningful spiritual truths** and about our journey through life hopefully, to the kingdom of heaven.



There are some forty easily identifiable such stories throughout the Gospels. We call these stories “**parables**”. And in this sermon we are “unpacking” something, at least, of the meaning of one of the most widely remembered, the parable of the prodigal son.

Most, if not everyone would agree with a definition of a parable which I came across on the internet, a being “a short simple story illustrating a moral or spiritual truth.” (See <https://renew.org>biblical>)

But in fact a parable is more than this.

The Greek word for “parable” means “two things”, or “**two meanings**”, running alongside of each other. Simply put, this means one, obvious, meaning alongside of which, or within and underneath, is another meaning.



Early in His ministry Jesus told a series of seven parables, collected together as these are in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 13. The first of these seven is the parable – or story – of a Sower who went out to sow. Some of the seed, Jesus said, fell on hardened pathways, other seed fell on stony ground, some fell amongst thorns, and some on good ground. Straightaway the twelve disciples knew that Jesus was telling a story which **embodied a meaning not immediately recognizable**. So, Jesus explained to them what this embodied, deeper, meaning is. (See Matthew 13:18-23)



But let's return to the parable of the prodigal son which is the subject of this sermon. You have already seen that it is about a wayward, strong-minded, younger son who decided to leave the comfort and security of the family home; who insisted that his father give him the inheritance due to him; who went and wasted this inheritance in **self-indulgent, sinful, living**; who, having spent everything was reduced to feeding pigs; and who became so hungry he was glad to eat what they, the pigs, were eating.



One day he recovered his senses (Luke 14:17); **saw how pitifully he had been living**; and made up his mind to go back home and to face what was probably going to be the scorn of people who had known him and very severe punishment from his father. But No, the indication is that from the time he had left home, **his father had looked out for his son every day**. And it was his father who spotted him one day, trudging back home.



Even from a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20). **A broken and repentant young man**, as he now was, he could see he had sinned “against heaven” as well as in your (his father’s) sight. **Rejoicing, his father made a welcome feast for him.** This **upset and angered his older brother** who had to be persuaded to see what was positive and to be celebrated in all of this. “It was right”, the father told his older son “that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”



Along with the other parables, some forty of them in total, this story has remained fresh for two thousand years. It hasn't grown old and it never will. And untold millions of people have over the centuries been enriched, encouraged and reassured by it. In so few sentences so much is taught us **about God and about how He responds to our wayward, stubborn and sinful behaviour.**

From time to time it is good for us to pause and to reflect on the amazing gifts and blessings God gives to each one of us. He gives us these amazing physical bodies we live in while we are in this world. He equips us with talents, each one of us differently from the any other. He causes treasured memories to be stored away within us. He quietly arranges things so that as we approach adulthood, and in our adulthood, **we have freewill and so are able to choose the kind of person we wish to be.** He gives us this



So very often, however, we forgot this, and we demand to take these things as if they are our very own to do with as we like. There are several ways to define “sin”, but here is one of them. **Sin is to take what is of God and use it in self-promoting, self-centred, self-gratifying ways.** And this is what is meant by the younger son demanding his share of his father’s inheritance to do with it as he wished.

We can be sure that his father will have tried to persuade his younger son not to be so head-strong and to jeopardize his future, as he was intent on doing. But he didn’t listen and went ahead with his plan.





In every instance when sinful desires begin to emerge within us God uses strategies to hopefully divert us from the course of action which is becoming increasingly attractive to us. God doesn't get to a point, saying "I give up! Go ahead and do what you are so determined to do!" No, not at all. For instance, **He appeals to our conscience;** to our better self. And if that is ineffective **He reminds us of possible consequences** to our reputation; to what other people might think and say. Perhaps we hear a voice within telling us "at least leave it to another day". In other words, an angel talking. Or, that voice maybe the voice of a partner, or a close friend, urging, "At least leave it to another day." Picture in your mind someone who has become very angry and resentful and determined on retaliation for some insult, or an unwanted, inflammatory email. And a partner or a colleague urges her to "at least leave it to another day."

What is a reality, of course, is that often times we won't listen and plunge forward into doing something that does not have a good ending. Just like the headstrong younger son of this parable.

When appeals to our conscience fail; when reminders of consequences have no effect on us; when the wise advice of a partner or a colleague makes no impression on us; the Lord – finally – has to permit us to say or do what we are so determined to do. **God is never, ever, the cause of evil!** But there are countless times, even in the life of one single person, when He permits evil.

Remember: **permission is not approval.** Sometimes when a teenager is absolutely determined on a wrong course of action parents may reach the point when they have to permit their son and daughter to say or do what is their intention. But that doesn't mean they – the parents - approve.



That doesn't mean God abandons us to evil. Sin is hell. And what in one sense is amazing is that God follows us into hell. He does not let us go. He does not leave us to our own devices. If the Lord let us go we would fall into the deepest hell. **But by holding on to us still, restraining us still**, as and when He can, the Lord prevents such a free-fall. And He works to ensure, as much as possible, that the experience is not entirely a waste.

For example, it is not unusual for a person to emerge from sin bringing forward with them an intense feeling of self-loathing. It might be from an episode of dishonesty or corrupt dealings.

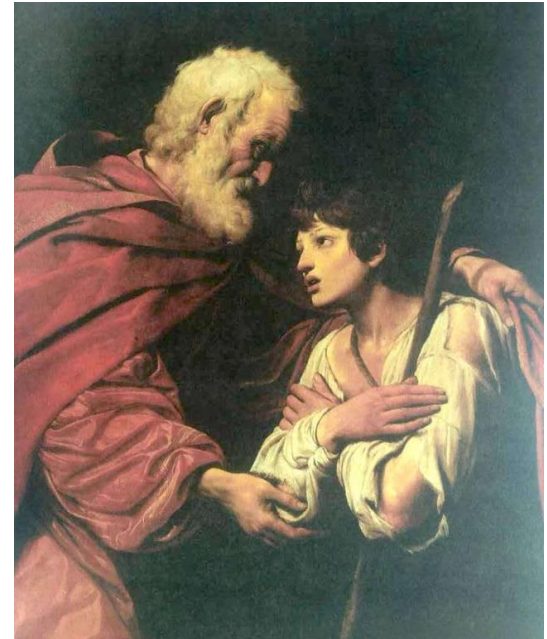
Another person may emerge from sin haunted by the darkness of the world of sin, the shame.

Sadly, it may be that only by seeing the destruction and hurt caused by sin that a person comes to their right mind.



Feeding the pigs, in the spiritual sense, means indulging our earth-bound, self gratifying, appetites. And it was in the midst of feeding the pigs that the younger, prodigal, son, had his awakening and saw himself to be the pitiable, loathsome, person he had become.

From being insane, or out of his mind, which is what happens when we sin, he recovered his senses and became sane again. From being dead, in sin, now he began to come alive again.



The apostle Paul taught that “The wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23) **In sin we become dead** - unresponsive and unmoved by,

- ◆ the needs of others
- ◆ the feelings of others
- ◆ the happiness of others



We become lost in a world of self, when it is only our needs, our feelings and our happiness, that matters.

It is not only the damage that sin does to us that matters. What also matters, immensely, is the harm sin does to others, meaning such things as the hurt we cause through sinning.



What, then, about the way back?

What is going to be involved as we re-trace our steps to our Father's home? Will He want us? Will He throw us out? Will He punish us? Will He make us suffer, to learn our lesson?

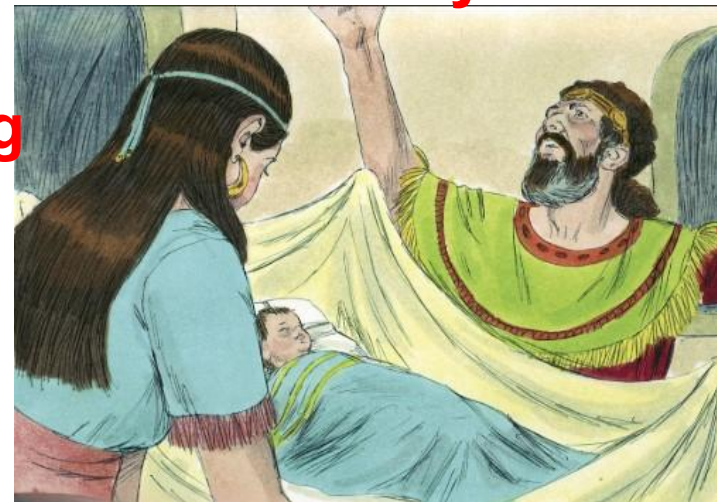
It is easily overlooked, exactly what this prodigal son was saying when, at last, he recognized and said, first to himself, **"I have sinned against heaven and before you (his father)"**.

Recognition of bad behaviour is one thing, but it is not repentance. Recognition of bad behaviour would have involved him saying, "Father, I owe you an apology for the way I have messed up." But, do you notice (?), he actually went much further and deeper than this. His words were, "I have sinned against heaven." In other words he could see that **he had ruptured his connection with heaven**. He could see that his sinful behaviour had been an offence against heaven and against God.



This is exactly what king David acknowledged after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband. His Psalm 51 begins, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your loving-kindness.....For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned.” (Verses 1, 3, 4). Just to repeat the point: **sin involves a breakdown of our relationship with God and with heaven.**

Such an acknowledgement is **the first step** of repentance. And it requires us to be **totally honest, no excuses, no blame of others, no looking for escape routes away from our guilt.**



As we read in the Teachings of the New Church:

“Actual repentance is,

- ◆ to **examine** oneself
- ◆ to **recognize and acknowledge** one's own sins
- ◆ to **take the responsibility**,
- ◆ to **confess** them before the Lord
- ◆ to **beg** for help and power to resist them a

And in this way to **give them up and lead a new life.**”(Apocalypse Revealed 53:5)

But what awaits us as being the outcome of this process? Will it be some form of punishment? Will I have to do certain things to win back God's favour? Or, will He just not want to know me anymore?



Perhaps the most beautiful example, in the Gospels, of the Lord's forgiveness is to be found in the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery. People rushed to condemn her and insisted she should be stoned to death. Jesus challenged her accusers to look into their own lives and, when they did, feeling now **convicted by their own sins**, they drifted away. "When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman He said to her, 'Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said to her, 'Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more..' " (John 8:10 & 11) There is nothing here about punishment of the woman. She did not need to earn the Lord's blessing. All would be well if she **turned from sin and chose to live a new and different life.**



This so needs to be emphasized: God never gives up on us. Just as his father never gave up on his wayward son. **In fact He is looking out for us every day, yearning for us to return.**

This is such a wonderful thing to remember about the Lord, that He is watching out for us every moment of every day. “Even”, said Jesus, “the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” (Matthew 10:44). “He it is who declares what our thoughts are.” (Amos 4:13) And whether we be in heaven or in hell, He is present with us. (Psalm 139:8)

This, too, is from the Teachings for The New Church, that **“the Lord wishes to draw every person all the way to Himself and by so doing to bless them in every way with glory and happiness.”** (“Secrets of Heaven” 6645:2).



And we **do not need to fear!** Please keep this in mind, the Lord is not waiting to punish us and we do not have to make amends or win back His favour. **When we return He accepts and welcomes us with joy and celebration.** “There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just people who do not need repentance.” (Luke 15:7).

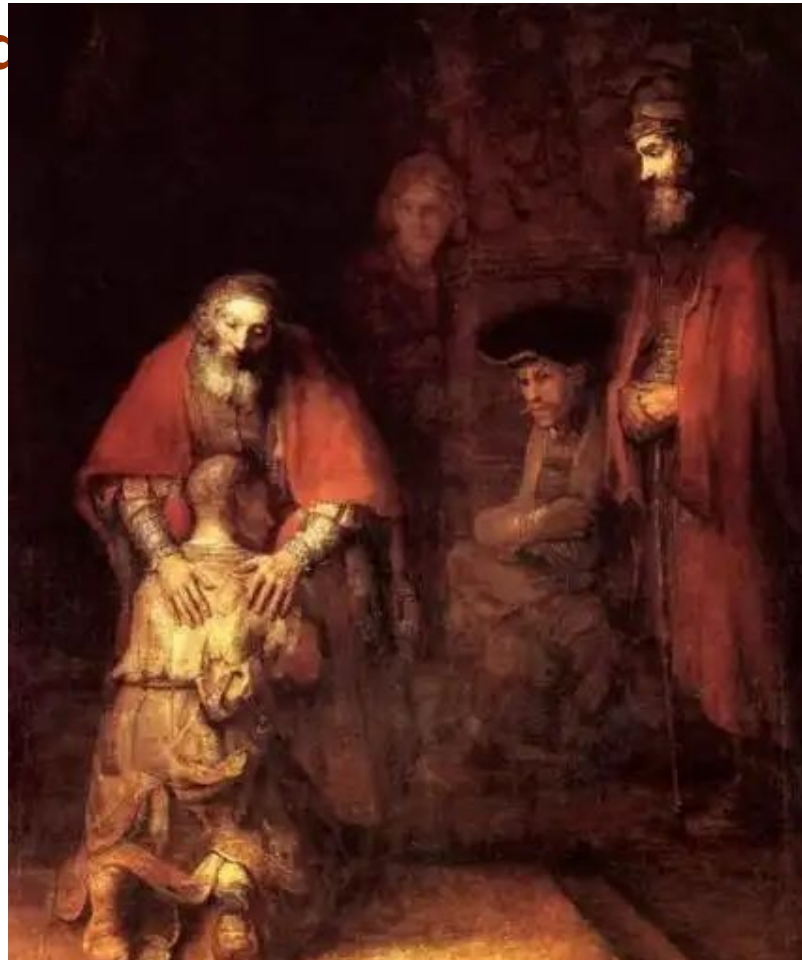
The pathway to regeneration; to becoming a re-born person; is marked by a succession of many, many, new beginnings. And **it is always a new beginning that the Lord is focused on as being the outcome of repentance.** He has already forgiven us and we do not have to beg Him for it. The Lord’s forgiveness is always there; unceasingly available; and **it is by means of repentance that we receive that forgiveness into ourselves.**

Disgusted with ourselves as we might be from time to time, and as the younger, prodigal son was,



What, then, of the older brother in this parable? He had dutifully stayed with his father and, as he saw the situation, had never had the opportunity to live self-indulgently as his younger brother had done. What is this younger brother in us?

The old business.



◆ Self-righteousness, in this situation, is that part of it which questions, “Was all this necessary?”

◆ Self-righteousness says to us, “Surely the good in me outweighs any sins I commit!”

◆ Self-righteousness is a voice within which says to us, “All of this is not for you. After all, you live a mostly good life! You have nothing to worry about!”

In other words,

◆ self-righteousness is **living externally**, and - relatively - **on the surface** and is dismissive of the need to repent

But this **has to be gently challenged**, just as the father in the parable challenged his older son.



“And he (the father) said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.

It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is now found.”

Amen



Readings:

Psalm 103: the verses 1 to 5 and 11 to 18

Luke Chapter 15: verses 11 to 32



Arcana Caelestia (Secrets of Heaven) 9014:2 &3

(Explanation: the Teaching in the following paragraph from the Teachings of The New Church is that because of sincere repentance the Lord is now able to withhold us from our sins. The Lord is unceasingly, and without hesitation, ready to forgive. But it is only following repentance that we open ourselves up to the His forgiveness flowing in.)

We read,

“The majority within the Church think that the forgiveness of sins involves wiping and washing them away, like the removal of dirt by water, and that after forgiveness people go about clean and pure. But let it be known that the situation with the forgiveness is altogether different from that.



Being Mercy itself, the Lord forgives everyone their sins. **Nevertheless they do not come to be (effectively) forgiven unless the person sincerely repents, refrains from evils, and after that leads a life of faith and charity, doing so to the end of his or her life.** When this happens the person receives spiritual life from the Lord, called new life. Then when with this new life the person looks at the evils previously indulged, he or she turns away from them. **It is when this happens that a person's sins have been for the first time been forgiven.** For the reason that the person is now maintained in truths and forms of good by the Lord. This shows what the forgiveness of sins is.”



THE END

