

## BARCOMBE CHURCH - ST MARY'S (CONKER ROOM)

8 p.m. HOLY COMMUNION - 17 FEBRUARY 2010

**ASH WEDNESDAY**

**Lk. 15: 11- 32 - PARABLE OF THE LOST SON**

*Grant, O Lord, that in the written word and through the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, even our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN*

Together with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, this is the most familiar and best-loved of all Jesus' parables, and indeed even outside Christian circles it has been dubbed "The Greatest Short Story in the World."

It's the third in a trilogy of stories in Luke chap. 15 to do with losing and finding, this one being built around the son losing the inheritance, realising the lostness, and finding what is *really* lost – not so much the wealth, but the love of the father. In fact, a more appropriate title for these verses might be "The Parable of the Loving Father."

I propose to pick out a few points from this well-known story and then see what we might learn from it as we prepare for the season of Lent.

First, this story really needs to be understood in the context of the two preceding ones, because all three narrate a different aspect of the theme of losing and finding. The sheep represents those who have gone astray; the coin speaks of someone lost who needs help to be found; the son's tale is about foolish and deliberate rebellion.

Second, if you read the whole chapter, you'll find bits missing from the last story, even though it is the longest of the three. For example, the moral of the lost son story is so clear that Luke doesn't need to spell it out as he does with the others: of the lost sheep he declares, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (v. 7); and of the lost coin "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (v. 10). Luke has no such similar verse at the end of the lost son story: he assumes his hearers have well and truly got the message by now.

Again, the son seems to say spontaneously, "I will set out and go back to my father ... " (v. 18a), but from an interpretation of the second parable regarding the symbolism of the woman and the lamp standing for the Church and the Holy Spirit respectively, then Luke need not introduce the Spirit's work in the young man's heart again.

Third, the great theme throughout Luke's Gospel is salvation, and this parable points it out most clearly: the son's distress as he realises what he's thrown away tells of man's misery in being lost through his deliberate sin; the earthly father's delight and implied forgiveness at his son's return declares God's joy and ready forgiveness towards a returning sinner; the father's watchful waiting – "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him;" (v. 20b) – speaks of God's yearning for his lost children to seek him of their own free will; there is loving forgiveness with no recrimination, even though the son deliberately separated himself from the father. No "Where on earth have you been?"!!

What happened to me recently illustrates my fourth point. A couple of weeks ago on Tuesday I had a swine-flu jab – risk category – end of a cold – told OK to have – but had ghastly reaction: weak, depressed, couldn't focus/concentrate, do anything for more than a very short time, exhausted. Slept for 12 hours on Thurs. Felt better by following Sunday, and everything gradually righted itself again.

It's not a very good example, but it's why I love the phrase in this story, "When he came to his senses ..." (v. 17a). After feeling mentally shattered for a few days, it was as if I had come to my senses – and what a glorious relief it was, too!

Another place: Mk. 5: 15: healing of the demon-possessed man: described as "sitting there, dressed and in his right mind ..." And in Paul's second letter to Timothy (1: 7), he says, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of a *sound mind*" as it says in the older versions.

So, curiously, it's sometimes when we are at our most rational that we become most aware of our need for faith. When we can rise, even momentarily, above the clamour of the world, guilt at our sinfulness, our own self-pity, when we come to our senses in other words, *then* we glimpse our need of God and his forgiveness in our lives. And the great reassurance in this story – to me anyway – is the word *when*. Not *if*, but *when*. Jesus says his Spirit *will* gently lead us to that place where we will be our right mind again, act as we know we should, return to the Father, acknowledge our need and receive his forgiveness. And welcome.

Lastly, in verse 24 we find these wonderful words, "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Isn't that a beautiful picture of Christian conversion with another wonderful phrase, "This son *of mine* ..." "God created all of us for himself, to love us, to care for us, to enjoy a personal relationship with us – and yet we were lost, *as if* dead, and now we are found, alive again!

So how does all this speak to us on the eve of Lent? The word which is key to this short series of stories, and also to Ash Wednesday and Lent, is v. 7 again: "... there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents ..." and it's the word **penitence** – "Father, I have sinned against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." What depths of utter desolation the son must have plumbed to bring himself to say those words to his dad!

Like many of you here, I have a son, and even in my worst nightmares I cannot possibly imagine a situation in which Nick knocks on the door and says, "Pa, can I come in? (he calls me Pa – in our case it's short for Padre ...). Pa, you'd better sit down, because I've got something very difficult to tell you ... "

I'd like to think I'd have the fortitude to say, "Nick, before you go any further, I want you to know that whatever you say will not affect my love for you." After that – I don't know. But I do know that I would also feel very proud and glad that we had the sort of relationship in which he *could* share anything with me.

Penitence, then, is about coming to our senses, holding on to the unshakeable fact that we are God's children, but that we have slipped so far in our discipleship to Jesus that it's like we've been in a distant country. Without any pre-prepared speech we approach our heavenly Father, assured of his love for us, confess our sinning and ultimately await the reality of his forgiveness through the cross of Good Friday and the celebration of arising with him on that glorious Easter morn.

Yes, like the prodigal son, we might be truly lost, but we can indeed be truly found.

Amen

Ash Wednesday sermon – 2010.docx