



Sermon preached by Dr Janet Bottoms on 30th March 2025

Readings: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32, Deuteronomy 10:12-21, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and scribes were saying 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them'."

You can see how the temperature is rising. There are two different, potentially hostile groups in the same crowd, and an increasingly large gap opening between them, so Jesus tells them a story. It's a story about two sons, a common theme in scripture, and the first part focuses on the younger.

To the listeners, the case against this younger son is strong. First, he demands to be given the "wealth" he sees as his due before it would come to him legally. He then squanders it in "dissolute living", and in case we are in any doubt about what that means the elder son will make it very clear. He has "devoured your assets", he will tell his father, "with prostitutes"! This younger son is definitely a sinner. Yet "when he had come to himself", when he had remembered who he was, and recognized what he was now, even while accepting he had no claim on his father anymore, he turned homeward.

There he found his father was not only longing for his return but watching for him, running to meet him, and celebrating his return, joyfully. It's a story we know well, perhaps even from childhood.

But it is the elder son I want to focus on today, because the whole story is, in fact, intended as a response to the Pharisees who were grumbling about Jesus's attitude to sinners. The elder son is everything that should rejoice a father's heart. He does his duty. He works for his father, stays at home, does all that is asked of him and then, as *he* comes homeward after labouring all day, he hears music and dancing! A party! And why? *"Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back, safe and sound."* Him - the undutiful one - the sinner against all law and morality. Why should he be accepted back: not merely accepted but welcomed? Celebrated!

There was no way this brother was going to join in. His father came out to plead with him, but - "No! There I am" he says to his father, "slaving away for you all my life; never asking anything; but when this son of yours comes back, you not only receive him, you throw a party for him. 'I've never had a party' he says, 'even a small one with a few friends. But this son of yours!'" He is working himself up into a real rage, but his father checks him. He has missed the point. He could have had a party: after all, he didn't even have to ask. *"All that is mine is yours,"* says his father, *"But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."* The father is bubbling over with joy because his family is complete again, but now it is the elder son who is separating himself from it, and it is his father he is attacking. *"This son of yours,"* he says, and his father replies gently – so gently – *"my son"* . . . *"this brother of yours"*. Family. It is a point that Jesus has to make again and again.

Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector? Both went up to the Temple to pray, but the Pharisee's prayer consists of thanking God that he is not like other people. He obeys all the laws, he is an exemplary member of the family, and certainly -- as he senses the presence of the man behind him – not like this tax-collector. The other man stands alone, his head bowed, and simply prays *"God be merciful to me, a sinner."* *"I tell you,"* says Jesus, *"this man went down to his home justified – put right with God – rather than the other"*, the man who felt no need to repent or change.

The contrast recurs again and again in the gospels, either in parable or in some of Jesus' encounters with other people. There was Zaccheus, the tax-collector, who climbed a tree to be able see him? Jesus told Zaccheus to come down, quickly, and invited himself to dinner. Those who saw it grumbled *"he has gone to be the guest of a sinner"*, but Zaccheus, in his joy at being chosen, at being accepted by Jesus, promised to give to the poor half of all that he possessed, and to repay four

times over anyone he might have defrauded. *"Today"* said Jesus *"salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham."* Salvation; healing; the past wiped out; the lost son restored to the family. *"For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."* [Luke 19:10]

Then there was the nameless woman who came to the house of a Pharisee where Jesus was dining, and stood behind him, weeping, washing his feet with her tears and anointing them. The Pharisee was shocked. Surely, he said, if this man was really a prophet, he would know what this woman is. He wouldn't even let her touch him. But Jesus did know. He also knew why she was so emotional. *"Look at her"*, he says. *"Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."* Then he reassures her. Your faith, your willingness to believe that you have been forgiven, your acceptance of that forgiveness and the loving response that shows all this has set you free. *"Go in peace."* She is healed. [Luke 7: 36-50] As the writer of the first Letter of John tells us, *"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us."*

If, then, we return to the story of the two brothers we see that it is not about them so much as about the third person in the trio, the Father. He judges neither son ... He loves them both unconditionally and he wants them to love one another. But do they love their Father? The whole message of the Bible, Old Testament and New, is based on the central fact of God's love for the people he has created and his pain at their lack of love either for him or for each other. This brings us to our reading from Deuteronomy. *"So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him and to serve [him] with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and his decrees that I am commanding you this day for your own well-being."*

In Deuteronomy, the occasion for these words, spoken by Moses, is at the end of the Israelites' time in the wilderness: the time of preparation for entering the promised land, but in the Book of Joshua there is another version of this same moment in time. In that version Moses has already died and it is Joshua who leads the people. In that version Joshua is told to *"make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time."* Why? Because most of the exodus generation had died in the wilderness and those who were born there had never been circumcised, the essential sign of belonging to God's chosen people, the people of the Covenant.

In Deuteronomy, however, it is not physical circumcision that is asked for but spiritual. *"Circumcise, then the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer"*. Make love the sign of the Covenant relationship. Accept, first, and believe with all your heart that God loves you, and wants your love; and, secondly, that just as God *executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers* you must do the same. Extend to others the same love that you have been given since you, also, were once *"strangers in the land of Egypt."* As they prepare to enter the promised land they are reminded again of their part in the relationship. *"Do not forget, because you are going to be tempted to forget when you move into the land."*

Of course they did forget, time after time, as they were reminded time and again by prophets such as Hosea: *What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.* [Hosea 6: 4-5] Later, Jesus would tell the Pharisees, *"Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'".* [; Matt. 9:13]

That God loves the people he has created and that he wants them to love him and each other is the very heart and soul of both the Covenant relationship and the message of Jesus. It is also the same theme that we heard this morning in our reading from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. *"Since God is making his appeal through us we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."* His appeal! God's appeal! God is like the Father in the parable, searching for his lost son and pleading with the elder son; pleading with him to come in, to greet the brother who had come home. But Paul goes further. *"All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."*

“The ministry of reconciliation.” What an astounding claim. What a terrifying one. *Reconciliation*, from the Latin for renewal, restoration - to renew, repair, restore, reunite - and *ministry* meaning “service”; true service, working hard but willingly, serving with understanding, empathy and love. *“The ministry of reconciliation.”* It also means seeing differently, with fresh eyes. Paul writes, *From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view* - that is, according to the culture, the prejudices, the values we have grown up with. Even though Paul himself had once regarded Jesus from a human point of view, as he admits, that is now behind him. He has been changed so the way he sees has been changed. *“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”*

A new Creation! For Paul there is a simple progression.

- It starts with God’s action, *In Christ* God was reconciling the world to himself.
- Then Jesus. The Word made flesh. *For our sake he made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* Justified. Put into new and right relationship with God and the world.
- Finally us, appointed as *ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.*

That is the challenge; that is the calling; and just how difficult it is has always been recognized.

Jesus himself recognized it very well. *“If any want to be my followers, says Jesus, let them deny themselves.”* Deny themselves; that is renounce the priority we naturally, even if unconsciously, give to “self” - its wishes, its fears. *“Let them deny themselves and follow me.”* Follow. Copy. Do as I do. See as I see. Love as I love.

The man sitting on the street outside the local supermarket. The prosperous man walking past him. The young men jostling each other on the corner. Or the woman pushing a buggy with one hand and focusing on a phone in the other. The old woman alone at the bus stop, muttering, even shouting at herself or at the world. *“See this woman”* says Jesus, as he said to the Pharisee. *“See this man.”* He also says, *“Do not judge – so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”* [Matthew 7:1] How easy it is for us to judge, rather than see with the understanding eyes of Jesus.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” Seeing, not judging. Serving, not preaching. Helping, where we can, if we can, while humbly recognizing our own limitations. Loving. Praying. Most of all praying, remembering that though we are called to be *“ambassadors for Christ”* it is God, it is God in Christ, it is the Spirit of God that is the power at work in and through what we do or say, how we understand and how we love if we are to be reconcilers.

So, *“ambassadors for Christ”*, let us place our trust in God, who will accept our service however small it may appear to us. Let us, too, *Rejoice in the Lord always*, as Paul told the little church in Philippi, *Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Amen.

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All quotations from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. (OUP 1995)