

Making up Stories

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)



Downing Place URC
Lent 2023 (Week Four)

(Week Four) One way to approach the story is to think how a situation like this might have arisen in a family. Perhaps along these lines ...

Galilee in Jesus' time was changing. A smart new town had just been built, at Sepphoris near Nazareth, and people must have been intrigued by the scent of wealth and promise. Yet rural life was coming under stress. Large estates were emerging. Some small farmers would start to slide, down a spiral that turned landowners into tenants, tenants into casual labourers, and labourers into beggars.

A young man, even in a fairly well-off family, might think, 'There's no future round here.' In many a society, custom and heritage do not satisfy new generations. The lure of the city can attract more than village life, and the grass gets greener the further away you look. But once you leave, money is quickly spent. Safe housing, steady work and real friends are not easy to find; good decisions are hard to take on unfamiliar turf; there are many casualties.

Family cohesion is hard to hold when society itself is changing. It can be easier to break relationships than to mend them or to find new ones. Indeed the end of the story may confirm this – we do not hear what the older brother decides.

Finally, our lectionary sets this as the gospel text for Mothering Sunday (one year in three). So although only men feature in this story of family life, we might want to imagine how the mother or her daughters would respond. For often it is women who have to pick up the pieces when a family fractures.

What would the parable of the Prodigal Son gain and what would it lose, **if it stopped at verse 24**?

Of the three parables in Luke 15, **does one really stand out** for you? Why do you think that is? Is it helpful to have the three together, or would you rather focus on them one at a time?

How well do you think the three parables of Luke 15 respond to the challenge at the very start of the chapter?

How convincing do you find the thought that the story of the Prodigal Son has **Old Testament resonances**, such as ...

- Israel's exile, and return to the land;
- or a story of two brothers ...
 - Jacob and Esau, in Genesis 25–33;
 - Cain and Abel in Genesis 4?

If there is an Old Testament echo, **how does this contribute** to the message and meaning of the parable?

How does it feel to hear stories where people get treated better than they really deserve? Might some readers, both ancient and modern, think that this parable makes God too easy-going?

Do you think this parable has anything to say about our own families and the ways that we contribute to their life?

Is it helpful to have this story read in church, and perhaps preached about too, on Mothering Sunday?