

## Sermon Archive 380

Sunday 27 March, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Did Jesus ever know a family within which a son insulted his father by asking for an inheritance before the father had died? (Die, will you, daddy, go on.) Did he ever know a family in which some well-loved child of promise ever stuffed up totally, with stuff draining from his pocket, his heart, his dignity? (Money on lawyers, doctors and drug dealers . . .) And did Jesus ever witness some poor, insulted old man who should have waited for an apology, racing out to wrap in his arms around his [ . . . ] son?

Well maybe Jesus did - or didn't. Who knows what he witnessed! Either he saw such a family (since they're real enough to see), or maybe he dreamed one up. We're told it's a parable, just a story. So, if you don't like stories, or think that stories are pure fiction, then you can relax. You can ignore the fact that many of the characters are somewhat well represented in our world. And you can ignore the fact that the one character from the story who seems absent in our world is the father - who meets the dysfunction by entering into it, claspng it unto himself, then rising above it with a pure and foolish love.

Maybe it's time for a sermon of six bits, and a godly moment.

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The first bit. This bit's about someone growing up in a context of plenty. Cancel that - maybe not absolute plenty, but plenty positioning itself on the edge of a family life, as a possibility given careful management. I mean, it's not a context within which the fatted calf is slaughtered and eaten every day. Not even a goat is killed and put on the table. But, you know, a fatted calf is out there in the paddock - growing, getting fatter, for some time off in the future. The context within which the person grows is far from poverty. Yet plenty is something saved up, not used for now, something off on the edge of where we are.

Within this adequate realm of living on the cusp of better fortune, a child grows into ambition. Tiring of the modest but secure wealth his accident of birth (or fortune

of birth) gives him, he sets his eye on more. Isn't that what ambition is? The setting of the eye on more? (Or maybe the eye takes the blame for the heart. Indeed, it is the heart that assesses what is within reach, should it deny that part of itself that is called kinship, respect, gratitude, home, love.) Anyway, the son ceases to see a father who is providing home; he begins to see resources that might belong to him - an inheritance that might be taken - maybe including that fatted calf slowly growing on the edge of the family prudence. What will come of this?

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The second bit. Having insulted the father, by wishing him dead; having grabbed his part of an inheritance which ought never to have been claimed while his father was alive, the son steps out into the world. The world is pleased to receive him, with all the riches he brings. And isn't the world always so pleased! Bring me your foot traffic. Bring me your credit. Bring me your business. For God sake, don't bring me your feelings or your need. Those don't fit our calculations. They're not things we can value.

Pretty quickly, within this new context, into which the son has entered, the absence of "family sympathy" makes a difference. In the cold, hard world of commodification, whatever used to sustain him no longer does. Here, he's a consumer. He's a work unit. He's a sort of human resource. Yes, in this environment he can buy and sell things. He can squander and invest in what the story-teller calls "dissolute living". (His brother later will call it "the hiring of prostitutes" - but that may say more about his brother's proclivity to imagine - or not . . .) Whatever, the second bit is about moving into a world where you can survive for a while - quite beyond your means, as you become separated from your home. Interestingly, when, as you move more deeply into this context, and begin to sense your increasing poverty and need, nobody within that context cares. "He would gladly have filled himself with pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything". No one. When you go into that world, no one will be found who cares.

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The third bit. Within the context within which no one cares, the son begins to renegotiate who he is, such that he might find a future. Realising that his only future lies in the past that he'd left, he decides to go home - but this time not as a son, but as a slave. "Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

In this third bit, let's pause to consider this figure. It's humanity having wanted more. Ambition is good, isn't it? It's humanity, however, having found the more, and having found in it less. It's humanity, having grown up and fallen down. God help us. It's humanity coming back to its place, feeling like it needs to present itself, in abject apology, as something that doesn't belong, unless it can earn its way, pay its way, keep its way as a slave. By work and works. By striving to be OK again. By paying its dues. By not really fitting - being a slave.

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The fourth bit. Witnessing all this - humanity's sad moving into the role of the slave, is an elder brother. We happen to know that the elder brother is far from a happy camper. He's full of resentment. Exactly like his fallen brother, he resents that the fatted calf is on the outer edge of his life - that plenty supports him but doesn't indulge him. He keeps a record of how he's working and what he's not getting. And, as mentioned before, he cultivates a hatred of those who acted on their ambitions - they're sluts and wasters. While part of humanity stumbles and falls in the world that doesn't care, another part of humanity stumbles and falls in a world that cares in exactly the wrong way - "keep away you bloody slave!"

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The fifth bit is to explore the world of the two brothers, and see whether there is anything in it, in its natural relational dynamics that might lead to greater good. One part of humanity whose experience of life has led itself to a place where no one cares. An experience of life where it's been prepared to accept its role as that of slave - someone who no longer really belongs to the family. And another part of humanity, judging and hating its brother, because the brother went in search of something it, itself, didn't have the courage to admit it wanted.

I don't know exactly what's likely to come from this family of humanity, but I suspect it'll be something like regret, judgment, and war. It will result in one refusing to call the other "brother". It will find nothing in itself, within its own natural dynamics and rhythms to do anything but be unhappy. Humanity, locked into its family dynamic of ambition, resentment, refusal, eternal cycles that pop up more and more often in disorder and war across the face of the earth . . . Looking for the sixth bit . . .

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"It was while we were far off, that God met us in Christ and brought us home."

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Into the story, into its sixth bit, comes the figure of the father. Hurt by the insult of his youngest child, bereft by all of his wealth and indeed all of his family name that has been squandered, he runs out to embrace the squanderer. (Did you know that in the culture of the story teller, running was something a person of dignity would never do?) As he enters the story, he loses his dignity - not that he had any since he was wished dead by his son! Dignity is nothing to the father figure. Everything to him is the embrace of the one who was lost, but now is home. Home!

What's going to make the difference for that part of our humanity that feels like it can only be present as a slave? The One who meets us in self-defacing love, and welcomes us home.

Ah, but there's more to humanity, and its plight than that which has done its ambitious squandering. There's another brother who resents and will not engage in welcome. To this brother also the father goes out. To this brother, the father says "all that is mine is yours". Love your brother. Just love him. He was dead, but now has come to life. He was lost, but now he's been found. Can't you share my joy that this is so?

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That was the sixth bit. And I said it would just be a six bit sermon. So I can't do a seventh bit. I won't. Only just, though, to mention that the fatted calf was slaughtered, prepared, and eaten at a feast. That provision for plenty got accessed as soon as brothers became alive, each to the other, under the father's care and love.

Humanity is at regret and at war. It is unsupportable. But when the father figure runs out in love, a feast begins.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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