

**Texts: Luke 15:11-24**

**Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2019**

**Brightons Parish Church**

**Following on from Easter, we've been working our way through a 9-week sermon series on Luke chapter 15, where we've been exploring what these three parables of Jesus reveal to us of our heavenly Father. Because, whilst the temptation is to focus on the sheep, the coin or the rebellious younger son, the true central character throughout is God, portrayed as the Father in the third parable. We've seen that Father God is prodigal Himself – He is extravagant in His love, He is patient, compassionate and forgiving. And along the way, we've paused to wonder if we can still hold such a view of God in the midst of a broken world and we've seen that for the elder brother too there is an invitation to come home to Father God.**

**That idea of coming home, of returning, is central to all three parables because to know that we belong somewhere has a profound impact upon us. I wonder, would you turn to your neighbour in a moment, and for one minute, share with them either something serious, or something silly, which helps you to know that you belong to your family or your friendship group? For example, when I come home after a busy day, and I walk in that door and Hope gives me a big cuddle, then I know that I'm home, that I belong. What are the serious things, or the silly things, that help you know you belong to your family or your friendship group? You've got one minute – so it's over to you!**

**In the parable of the prodigal Father**, the younger son has left home, he has rebelled, disgracing his Father, because he thought true life was to be found elsewhere. But things don't turn out as he plans and in time he comes to his senses and returns home to the Father. **As we saw in earlier weeks**, the Father had been waiting and watching, and so when He sees His son He is flooded with compassion and He runs to His youngest child. In the midst of that initial welcome, **we read these words:**

**'the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet..." (v22)**

**We've said throughout this series, that knowing the culture, knowing the context, of these parables can help us understand what Jesus was trying to convey about our heavenly Father. So, what do the robe and the ring signify?**

**Well, the Father asks for 'the best robe', which would have been the Father's own robe, as he was head of the family. It would have been a long flowing gown, a very special garment, reserved for unique occasions such as festivals. It was a sign of favour and honour, and yet the Father gives it to this son. This son who had been living off of the pig feed, who would be in an unkempt condition and so dirty and smelly that **one poet wrote** that the younger son was 'the boy who had gone from being affluent to effluent.'**

**It is to this son that the Father gives His best robe – so, what’s going on here? What does Jesus seek to convey? Well, what we have here is a great exchange – the son’s shame is covered by the Father’s honour – that robe is a sign of the Father saying of the younger son: “I have forgiven him completely, I am wiping the slate clean, this boy is totally pardoned.”**

**In this, Jesus conveys the means and scope of forgiveness which has always been at the heart of the Christian faith, a means and scope which comes as a shock to many people, including in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to renowned church leader Martin Luther. For much of his early life Luther wrestled with the imperfections in his own life and how distant he felt from God...**

**He increasingly struggled with the implications this had for his present life and then beyond the grave.**

**But eventually Luther, by God's help, came to understand the Scriptures afresh – that a healthy, positive relationship with God, a relationship described in the Bible as being righteous, of being in right standing with God, that kind of relationship is offered to one and all by a great exchange, **a great exchange provided for us through Jesus**: that on the cross, Jesus faced the justice of God so we might only know Father God's delight in us; that on the cross, Jesus, the perfect son of God, was rejected by Father God, so that we could be brought into God's family as sons and daughters.**

**I remember when I became** a Christian that someone explained it to me like this: that Jesus is like my open palm, nothing separates Him from God, He is perfect, He is righteous, Father God delights in Him fully. But we are like this other hand, and our rejection of God and His ways, what the Bible calls sin, that is like this black book on my palm – it creates a division between us and God, it is a big black mark over us, and because of it our relationship with God is not only marred, it is broken completely – God still loves us, but He can't delight in us fully, and that big black book is going to affect our lives both now and for all eternity.

**But on the cross, a great exchange takes place: Jesus willingly takes our black book, our sin, our rebellion, upon Himself, breaking His relationship with God...**



**and facing the eternal consequences for our sin in His own body.**

**And the effect is that we gain what Jesus had before that great exchange: we gain a perfect relationship with God, we gain the full delight of Father God, we gain an eternal hope and welcome from God into His family.**

**The prophet Isaiah described it this way: 'I am overwhelmed with joy in the Lord my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness.' (Isaiah 61:10)**

**In the early sixteenth century, Martin Luther came to own this great exchange for himself – he put his trust in Jesus and came in to a new relationship with Father God,...**

where fear was gone and joy came in its place, for he knew that God had pardoned him, and covered his shame with the best robe of all, the robe of God Himself.

I don't know what you make of all this – you might very well be thinking, “well Scott, I got invited here by my friend, and I really wasn't expecting to hear about sin and all that – this doesn't really feel like a weekend of invitation or welcome; I'm perfectly aware of God being Judge and I don't need you judging me.” And if you're feeling like that, I can understand that, I can resonate with that even – but the reason I had to start there is because of what comes next in the story. **For we read:**

‘the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger...’

**Rings feature in many stories, inside and out of the Bible, across so many cultures, for a ring is a powerful and enduring item - in this small and simple form a great deal of meaning can be communicated.**

**In the story of the prodigal Father, the ring speaks of the rebel being restored as a son. The ring would have been like a family signet ring and it signified a child's position as a son or daughter in the great family. In giving this ring, the Father was saying that this rebellious child was restored to his position as a son. The Father was saying that He accepted His youngest child; the Father accepted Him back in, that He was in effect adopting this rebellious child back into the family, and through that adoption, the Father was opening the way for His child to know a wonderful new future and life.**

**Jesus Himself said, 'I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness.'** (John 10:10)

**That is the purpose of Jesus, that is His reason for being, the goal behind His teaching and His death on the cross – that you and I can have life in all its fullness.**

**But do we know this? Not only in our heads but in lives. Do we know this? We might know that Father God sent Jesus to die in our place to secure our forgiveness, to give us a new robe, and so we know that Father God is like a Judge, and Jesus paid the penalty so that we can have life beyond death, and that's good news, but it can seem a bit remote and distant, something to think about nearer the time or on sad occasions.**

**But is that all Jesus meant in His words? Is Jesus simply our get into heaven ticket? Or is there something more to being an adopted son or daughter of the Creator of all things?**

**If you can't answer that question, or if you are waiting for me to provide the answer, maybe it suggests that whilst we know God as Judge, we maybe don't know Him very well as Father. Indeed, Martin Luther himself struggled with this, struggled to pray the Lord's Prayer because the words "our Father" were wrapped up in a picture of a hard, unyielding and relentless individual. But the parable of the prodigal Father, portrays a very different portrait of Father God, and a much fuller understanding of what it means to be adopted by Him.**

**Imagine that the younger son, after returning home, receiving the robe and the ring, then participating in that night of celebration, imagine after that he felt he had to watch his step, toe the line, that he was to stay in his quarters, adopt a quiet and reserved life, and not do anything with the pardon and position of a true son. What do you think the Father would feel? Do you think the Father would feel that the younger son had entered into the full life symbolised by the robe and the ring?**

**I doubt it!? I reckon the Father would be crestfallen – here is this son that he has rescued, that he has forgiven and restored, here is the son who was given pardon and position so that the path in front of him might lead to a full life, one of meaning and purpose and joy...**

**yet here is this son being a nice boy but a bit of a boring one, a good son but with the life gutted out of him. I think the Father would be heartbroken to see his son misunderstand or underappreciate all that had been given to him by his Father. This younger son has been given pardon through a robe and position through a ring, he has been accepted and adopted by the Father, so that as a son he can come into fullness of life, not live a tame and boring one!**

**And you know what – I wonder if Father God ever feels bamboozled by what we've done with the Christian faith? Jesus came to give us life in all its fullness, but then we seem to reduce the life of faith to being nice and religious, or having Jesus as our ticket to heaven...**

rather than seeing the life of faith as an adventure to be lived – **as the video said earlier**, God is on an adoption adventure, accepting and adopting us into His family, and then involving us in His plans and purposes, plans and purposes which are full of adventure and joy and life, and He invites us to be part of that, part of changing the world!

Friends, if this is not evident in our own lives maybe one of the reasons is that we have **not grasped a full enough picture of God**: we know Him as Judge, which He is, but we really don't know Him as Father; we know we're forgiven but we don't really know what it means to be adopted by God and to have Him as our heavenly Father, that we are accepted...



**We not only need to know that Father God clothes us with a robe, we need to know He gives us a ring as well.**

**But here's the thing, it is a two-part deal: you don't get the ring, without getting the robe first; you don't get position without pardon; you don't get adoption and acceptance, without forgiveness. So, you can't know the life that Jesus offers, life in all its fullness, if you don't know Jesus. And so, that's why we began with a focus on the cross, **with the great exchange.****

**And if you want to be part of God's great adventure in this world, then you need to share in that great exchange for yourself. If you're unsure how to do that, then come speak with me after the service, or start coming around church a bit more often,...**

**and hopefully one way or another you'll come to know the Father draping His robe over you.**

**But if you know you've shared in that great exchange, if you know you're a Christian, can I ask you, as an adopted son or daughter of God, are you sharing in the great adventure? Or have you tamed the life of faith to something comfortable, something familiar, but something less than God wanted for you? If that is you, and it can come upon us at any stage in the journey of faith, but if that is you, then maybe it is time for you to become reacquainted with the heart of Father God.**

**One of the best ways to do that, is to be in the Scriptures and talking with the Father about what you read, and being open to what He might say to you.**

**But a number of years ago, to help people grasp something of the heart of God, someone took many of the promises of God from the Bible and crafted them into what became known as “The Father’s Love Letter”. A video of that has now been made and I would like to play it for us now. As we listen to it, may the words reach deep into our souls, and reveal something of our heavenly Father and what it means to be His child.**