

Texts: Luke 15:11-20

Sunday 5th May 2019

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Last week we began our sermon series on Luke chapter 15 and we took quite a broad overview of the chapter, looking at each of the three parables Jesus told.

In the first two parables, Jesus spoke about a shepherd going in search of his lost sheep and a woman going in search of her lost coin. In the third parable, we explored the story of a father and his younger son. To help us understand what Jesus is getting at with these parables, we need to remember what He said **to His disciples:**

‘All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’ (Mt. 11:27) Here Jesus helps the disciples understand that He knows the Father perfectly, that Jesus is the ultimate authority on what the Father is actually like, and that part of His mission is to reveal the Father to others.

So, in our three parables from Luke 15, Jesus is seeking to help us grasp the character of Father God, and to see what the Father prioritises and how He interacts with the world. Last week, we saw that Father God loves with a seeking and prodigal love, that in the example of the shepherd and the woman we see a God who seeks us out,

so as to rescue us from our lostness, because God never writes us off.

And then in the example of the father and his lost son, we see a God who loves with such extravagance and such reckless generosity that He can truly be described as prodigal.

In the coming weeks, we'll take some time to dig a little deeper into some of the other traits which Jesus gives us of Father God, and we'll also ask some of the questions that arise out of these parables, especially the parable of the prodigal father and his two sons.

Since arriving here in Brightons, I've generally had a Friday off to look after my daughter Hope. A common

feature of my days off to go swimming together and we've been doing that since she was about one year old.

Now-a-days, I know not to fit in too many things before or after swimming, but in my foolish youth, I often attempted to fit in a bit of shopping as well. When Hope was younger, it generally worked quite easily, because she would sit in the trolley, interact or eat away on something. But when she could start walking, that brought its own challenges, because my daughter refused to go in the trolley any more.

The experience helps me empathise with a short story I **read this week: a man is in a supermarket, pushing a trolley which contained, among other things, a screaming baby. As the man proceeded along the aisles, he kept**

repeating softly,'Keep calm, George. Don't get excited, George. Don't get excited, George. Don't yell, George.'

A lady watching with admiration said to the man, 'You are certainly to be commended for your patience in trying to quiet little George.'

'Lady,' he declared, 'I'm George.'

How I feel that father's pain! Keeping our patience is such a difficult thing, whether with children, or colleagues, or family members, neighbours, or even here, we can rub each other up the wrong way.

Patience has been defined as a state of suffering with fortitude, as the ability to endure evils without complaining. The word comes from a Latin word meaning ‘suffering’, and has the idea of being able to endure much, to be ‘long-suffering’, of enduring without giving way to fury or to flight.

In the parable we read today, the third from Luke chapter 15, we are reminded of the younger son’s request and of the father’s response. Last week we saw how shockingly offensive **these remarks by the younger son are:** ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ (Lk. 15:12) To say such a thing in the context of Middle Eastern customs would be the equivalent of someone here saying: “I can’t wait until your dead. I want the money now.”

And then, to sell that portion of the estate, whilst the father was still alive, showed a total lack of decency and effectively said of the father, “To me, you don’t exist any more.” Ouch!

In all of this, **the younger son rejects his father, he rejects the Father personally, he rejects the fathers ancestry, he rejects the father’s way of life and what he stood for.**

Now, I find it hard to keep my cool when Hope decides she doesn’t want the lunch I’ve prepared – a lunch she specifically asked for, let me tell you – and yet here is a child causing untold hurt on multiple levels as he rejects his father so completely.

At this point in the story, following the customs of the time, the original listeners would be expecting a traditional Middle Eastern response from the father, which would have involved him driving out the son from the family with nothing less than physical blows.

And yet, the father, does nothing like that. We read that: ‘So the father divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, and set off for a distant country.’ (Lk. 15:12-13) Instead of responding with blows, the father patiently endures a tremendous loss of honour as well as the pain of rejected love. Ordinarily, when our love is rejected, we get angry, we retaliate and do what we can so that we don’t hurt as much.

But this father maintains his patience, and so his affection, for his son. The father bears the agony – he is truly long-suffering, he endures without giving way to fury or flight, and he doesn't compile rejection upon rejection.

And in this wonderfully moving story, we see a portrayal of our heavenly Father, who loves with a seeking and prodigal love, and does so with great patience towards us, His children.

I wonder, to what measure do we reflect this kind of patience? It is a of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, it should be increasingly seen in our lives if we are followers of Jesus.

Leonardo da Vinci once said:

‘Patience serves as a protection against wrongs, as clothes do against cold. For if you put on more clothes as the cold increases, it will have no power to hurt you. So in like manner you must grow in patience when you meet with great wrongs, and they will then be less powerful to vex your mind.’

This quote reminds me of what a friend once said: Christians should be the least offendable people anyone knows. Christians should be the least offendable people anyone knows. It makes sense, if you think about it a moment – if we are growing in the fruit of the Spirit, particularly love and patience, then we really shouldn’t take offence at very much, should we?

Paul says to the Colossians that we are to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, as well as bearing with one another and forgiving as quickly and fully as we have been forgiven by the Lord. So, we should be the least offendable people around, should we not? But, let me ask: how quickly do you take offence? How long do you hold on to a grievance? What hurts are you still holding on to and allowing to vex your mind?

These are hard questions to face up to – but we must, because we are called to reflect our heavenly Father. So, maybe it is time friends, for us to face up to the lack of patience in our lives? Maybe it is time to face up to all the ways we are short with one another,...

or where we become easily irritated, or hold onto a grudge or offence made against us? **Because, the God we serve,** and whom we call our heavenly Father, He is prodigal in His patience towards us, and we are called to reflect Him.

In addition to the father showing great patience and long-suffering at the beginning of the story, in response to such terrible treatment by his younger son, we also see another facet of the father's patience and a little later in the parable.

In v20 we read: 'So [the younger son] got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.'

The younger son has come to his senses, he has realised the folly of his choices and the selfishness of his actions, indeed, he probably realises the great shame he brought on his father and so the pain he also inflicted. But in his desperation, he still goes back to his father. And what do we read? ‘But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him...’

His father saw him. His father was looking out for him. Who knows how long the father had been watching? Long enough for his son to burn through a fortune, then become desperate, so desperate that he will work on a pig farm, which is offensive to Jews, and still longer than that because the son endures part of a famine as well.

The father likely waited a long time. He was long-suffering. He was patient. Who knows how many days he squinted in the sunlight, peering into the horizon, for the slightest hint of movement? Who knows how many nights he lit a torch and walked the boundaries of his home waiting on his son?

But the father did it, and he did it, because he loves with a prodigal, seeking love which will not allow him to give up being patient towards his precious child.

How many of us have waited patiently for something? It can feel like agony, but in these particular circumstances, it surely would have been near unbearable for the father.

To help us get a true feel of this, Christian author, Philip Yancey, has rewritten the parable in today's context and I've made it fit our situation, so let me read it to you.

(READ FROM BOOK: 'The Father You've Been Waiting For' by Mark Stibbe, pg179-183.)

Her father waited. Her father waited with patience beyond our comprehension, probably with great agony, and he did so because he loved her so very much.

Friends, Jesus told the parable, and Yancey retold the parable in today's language, so that we could see and appreciate afresh the prodigal love and patience of God – not with a fictional character, but with you and me.

We, each, are younger sons and daughters – we, each, have told God to drop dead, that we want His stuff: life, pleasure, the wonders of this creation, satisfaction in work, the enjoyment of family...many good, good things actually...and yet, we'd rather not have God – in fact, God is as good as dead to us.

Now, you know how much agony it feels when we are rejected, and you can imagine some of the agony the parents of the girl in the story must have felt. But imagine with me the agony God must feel, when we reject Him? Imagine loving with a perfect love – not the measure of love that you and I have towards our children, or the measure of love felt by the girls' parents – but rather a perfect, pure love, a love that is so holy, so other,...

that it defines love? What degree of agony does someone face when they love that strongly and they are rejected?

Friends, God loves you that much, that perfectly, and His heart breaks for you to return to Him and live in relationship with Him as His child. In His very great patience, fuelled by prodigal love, God waits, God suffers, for you, for you to return to Him.

Let me ask: have you returned to God yet? Would you call yourself a Christian? Would you say that God is the centre of your life? Being a Christian, being a child of God, is much more than coming to church, or giving your offering, or even being loving and patient.

To be a Christian, is to come home to God – that God becomes the centre of your life, such that you build your life upon Him and He shapes your choices, your values, your priorities – that’s when you know you live for God, that’s when you know you’ve come home. That’s true repentance.

And God is lovingly waiting for us, my friends – if you haven’t returned to God, will you come home to God today?

But God is lovingly waiting for any of us who have grown cold towards Him, despite being a Christian – for us too, He waits, and calls us home once more. If that is you, will you hear the call of God today and return home to Him?

Will you come back into His embrace and know His prodigal love for you? Because, even for you, God patiently waits, He waits for all of us to respond today, and every day, to His love.

May we all come home to God. Let us pray.