



Opening Prayer for Lent

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden;
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever received forgiveness you felt was undeserved and if so, what impact did this have upon you?

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
**Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**
While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
**For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.**
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,

and I did not hide my iniquity;
**I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord',
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.**

Therefore, let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;
**at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.**

You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

**I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.**

Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
**whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.**

Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

**Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,
they needed to deny themselves,
and take up their crosses.

God calls us into that same movement
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.
In this quiet space for reflection,
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
grant us peace.

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,
you walk with us all of our days,
and nothing in life or death or all creation
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.
Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,
share with us in our worries and struggles,
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.
We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus.
Amen

Reading Luke 15:1 – 3, 11 – 32

Sermon

Some stories have become so ingrained in the popular imagination, over a prolonged period of time, that we can be forgiven for thinking we know everything there is to say about them and what they mean. The Parable of the Prodigal Son arguably falls into that category. A father with two sons grants the younger brother his inheritance prior to his death, rather than afterwards as would normally happen. Said son goes away to a far-off country and squanders his wealth, just in time for a famine to hit the land. In desperation, he takes any job he can get, and ends up looking after somebody else's pigs. As nobody showed him any kindness, and he was starving hungry, he seriously considered helping himself to the pig food. At that moment, he came to his senses and realised that none of his father's staff were hungry

or smelly or dirty, like he was. He formulated a plan: he would return home, and plead with his father to be taken into the household as a hired worker. Yet, when he gets near to home, his father dashes out to meet him, clothes in him in the best garments, and slaughters the fatted calf ready for a party. Meanwhile, the older brother refuses to join the celebrations when he discovers what has happened, but his father begs him to lay aside his resentments because what was lost is now found again, and it was a time for rejoicing.

Now, it is undeniably true that this parable, unique to Luke's Gospel, is one of the most widely known in the whole of the Bible. Variations on its plot have underpinned the narratives of many a novel and film over the years, and different takes on what could have happened to the warring brothers next have been explored. However, such is the degree of familiarity which many of us have with the story that it has become somewhat domesticated, and we have lost an ability to see it clearly for what it is. Jeanette Winterson is among the most prolific and successful authors of recent decades, and she talks about how the writer's role is to confront readers with the 'shock of the familiar', arranged so that 'we can actually see it'. In this context, perhaps the task of the preacher is to do something similar, helping us to look at this parable again with fresh eyes, and so register just how shocking it would have been to the people journeying with Jesus from Galilee, up to Jerusalem ready for the Passover celebrations, and especially to the Pharisees and Scribes who criticised him about the company he kept (Luke 15:1 – 3).

With that in mind, and acknowledging my debt to Rev Katie Thomas for this thought, I invite you to imagine the Prodigal Son as the worst possible person you can think of right now – somebody like Vladimir Putin, for instance. The notion that someone who has acted in ways that are undeniably inhumane and profoundly evil might be forgiven, and embraced as a child restored to their full status in the household of God, is shocking and even offensive. It goes against our instincts,

and sense of natural justice. Yet, this is what the Parable was about, coming as it does on the back of two other stories which point to the scandalous grace of God. The first depicts God as a shepherd, who behaves absurdly by leaving ninety-nine sheep behind to bring back one who has wandered off (Luke 15:4 – 7). It is followed by the story of the lost coin, in which God is pictured as a woman who was ready to turn her house upside down to find it (Luke 15:8 – 10). Both result in an invitation to party, because what was lost is now found, and in the two taken together we have a powerful picture of repentance as being ‘found by God’. The third and final narrative goes further along this road toward the radical nature of divine grace, and confronts us with a far greater degree of complexity and ambiguity.

For starters, we need to keep in mind that to demand an inheritance be granted while one’s father was still alive was culturally equivalent to wishing them dead. Indeed, I think we would be more than slightly offended if the same thing were to happen to us now! This highlights how the Prodigal Son was more than just a party animal who wasted his wealth; at best, he was a selfish and deeply disrespectful person with seemingly no regard to the feelings of his father, and the shame his behaviour would have brought upon his whole family. Yet, as we all do at some point when we turn away from God’s ways so starkly, he ended up in his equivalent of the dung pit. Sooner or later, Putin’s actions will land him in his equivalent space, and it is only from that position that real repentance is possible in such circumstances. The Prodigal comes to his senses and decides to return back home, but debate continues as to whether his plan signifies a genuine remorse or willingness to manipulate an overly generous father (15:17 – 19). Either way, we can say that it is notable that although the father was watching for the son’s homecoming, he did not go searching for him; the Prodigal had to make the choice to come back for himself.

Right at the heart of this Parable – and in a scene famously depicted by Rembrandt – is the father’s dashing out to greet the son and then

drawing him into a passionate hug. Again, this behaviour went right against the social norms of the time, and thus was also scandalous. The head of the household was expected to behave with dignity and it was only slaves and women who would usually run about in public view. Moreover, as the Law of Moses commanded that persons who had behaved as badly as his son should be stoned to death, it might be that the father’s embrace was as much about protecting him from outraged people in the wider community as it was about forgiveness or relief. Providing him with a purple and therefore royal robe, a ring and sandals for his tired and smelly feet were both signs of his being truly restored within the family, and further ways to protect him from possible retribution (15:20 – 22).

In the midst of all this, and given how the best and most expensively reared animal was slaughtered to celebrate this son’s homecoming (15:23 – 24), it is tough not to feel at least some degree of sympathy for the older brother. Nobody called him when the celebration began and it was from a servant that he heard the news about his brother’s return (15:25 – 27). Not surprisingly given what come across as less than straightforward family dynamics, he saw red and refused to go in and join the party, leading his father to step out instead, and plead with him to come inside (15:28). The indignation with which he talks of his younger sibling and his feeling underappreciated after several years of working hard and doing the right thing (15:29–30) captures the scandalous and offensive nature of God’s grace way better than many a professional theologian! I remember vividly the way I felt as a teenager when we were told that some members of our class were to be given football match tickets to encourage them to come to school and not to keep skiving off. Why was bad behaviour being rewarded when those of us who kept in line received nothing? It seemed really unfair at best, and outrageous to say the least! Yet, the father’s reply to his oldest son’s perfectly understandable sense of injustice points to God’s joyful reaction when what was lost is found (15:31 – 32).

So, what are we to make of this radical Parable of the Prodigal Son? Well, there is no doubt that, if we embrace the 'shock of the familiar', arranged so that 'we can actually see it', we are faced with a deeply challenging text indeed! To return to our earlier imaginative exercise and the idea that we might picture someone like Putin as the sibling who takes his father for dead, squanders his resources and possibly seeks to manipulate his way out of the mess he has created for himself, I hope we can at least move beyond the temptation to treat the older brother as simply a miserable party-pooper. His reaction does make sense framed in terms of natural justice; it falls down because it fails to reckon with the outrageous grace of God. Moreover, taking a careful look at the father's behaviour in the parable ought to startle those who insist on speaking of God in exclusively masculine terms, because time and again here, the father violates social norms which were associated with being a 'real man' at that time. Indeed, he acts more like a mother figure than a stereotypical stern father. What can this tell us, one wonders, about the character of God, especially with Mothering Sunday in mind? Rigid boundaries set between male and female roles are blurred – or queered – in this story of restoration.

Reading this parable is a bit like sitting down to a banquet and trying to sample every last item in the buffet; there's too much here to take in just one sitting! So, perhaps, the most question here is about God and radical grace: are we willing to take the risk of going against the grain of society by embracing that scandalous way of being that can change the world? Right now, that grace is urgently needed. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of costly and self-giving love,
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,
we bring our prayers for others to you.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who feel they're stumbling in the darkness,
and for whom the light of God seems very faint right now.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those living in situations of war and conflict,
and all who routinely face injustices, hatred and violence.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those living in places hit by extreme weather,
and all of those people bearing the brunt of climate change.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those struggling with loneliness and isolation,
and those who find themselves far away from safety today.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who're key workers and keep things going,
especially those in roles which are too often overlooked.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those we know who are suffering right now,
as we wait for the light of warmer and brighter Spring days.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

As you journey onwards in God's love,
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,
may you step forward boldly and act justly..
And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,
now and for ever. **Amen**