**March 27 2022 Two Lost Sons. Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

Rembrandt’s painting, “The Return of the Prodigal Son” is well known and offers deep insights into the famous parable. The parable has often been re-named from “The Lost Son” or “The Prodigal Son” to “The Loving Father” “The Waiting Father” or even “The Lost Sons”.

The foundation of the story is stated at the outset, “There was a man who had two sons.”[[1]](#footnote-1) So our curiosity is aroused, how does this father relate to his sons. How do the sons respond to their father?

The story highlights the father. A father who loved his sons. “It was love itself that allowed him to let his son find his own life, even with the risk of losing it.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This is a father who was prepared to break with normal practice and agree to the request of his youngest son. Though this request would be seen as impertinent and highly disrespectful by the broader community, the father was prepared to divide his life (*bios*) (not just his property) between the two sons when it was requested. [[3]](#footnote-3) This would normally only happen after the death of the father. The father puts his own well being at risk, in order to enable his son to live independently. The younger son was breaking the family ties and treating his father as though he were already dead.[[4]](#footnote-4) This story pivots around the initiative and the compassion of the father.

It is a story of two lost sons. One recognises his “lostness” the other one…perhaps he eventually recognises it, but the story leaves it as an open question.

The younger son chose independence from his family and in the process became “disconnected from that “which gives life family, friends, acquaintances even food”[[5]](#footnote-5). He recklessly indulged his passions with no thought for the future. The younger son needed to honestly face himself, in order to start the journey home. He “became fully aware of how lost he was when no one in his surroundings showed the slightest interest in him. They noticed him only as long as he could be used for their purposes.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

This story is placed in a context within Jesus ministry when he was being criticised by the Scribes and Pharisees for eating with Tax Collectors and sinners.[[7]](#footnote-7) This was a society who shared their tables quite strategically. One could progress further up the strata of society by wise use of hospitality. Jesus however challenged these conventions.

The young son remembered what it was like in his father’s home. He recognised who he had become, what he had done. He recognises his “lostness”. The son remembered that the servants in his father’s household had a safer more secure future than he did. He decided to go home, to acknowledge his wrong choices, to ask his father to be merciful, and allow him to be a servant in the household. He returned in humility, with an openness to how his father may respond. He knew the type of person his father was, and he trusted in his character.

Rembrandt’s painting shows us the young man clothed basically in rags with one semi-intact shoe and the other foot cracked and dirty from walking home. His hair is sparse, he resembles a mis-treated slave. Yet the light which emanates from his father’s face falls also on him. He rests against his father’s chest like an infant. The gospel described the father running to embrace him, no one else would even give him food, but the father disregards decent practice and runs to him and embraces him and kisses him. The father was prepared to be shamed and even to shame himself for the sake of reconciliation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Rembrandt paints an image of what the father’s embrace may have conveyed. In the painting the father’s cloak is warm and open touching the son’s clothes, he bends in towards his son, but most poignantly he touches him. The hands of the father embracing the son are the primary focal point in the painting. The hands speak of blessing and welcome. The hands differ from each other. The right hand is smooth, delicate, feminine in appearance and it is positioned to soothe the son. The left hand looks older, weathered and worn through years of work, it touches his shoulder with a degree of gentle pressure, it is reassuring, strong and affirming.[[9]](#footnote-9)

However, there is another son in this story, a well respected son, a hard working young man, who has always conducted himself appropriately. The lostness of the elder son is harder to identify because he has led an exemplary life. “Outwardly the older son was faultless.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

The father’s “embrace of the younger son did not mean rejection of the older; the father has always loved his sons. However, the celebration that was instigated by the father for the returned, younger son proves to be the tipping point for the older son. “Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for the restoration of the penitent returnee”[[11]](#footnote-11), but the expectation would be that of repentance in sackcloth and ashes, not a party. The elder son’s refusal to enter and eat with the family is a huge statement in this culture that saw such significance in the sharing of food in so many contexts, within and beyond the family. The father leaves the house and goes out to plead with the older son. Though the host, he is prepared to go against cultural expectations to plead with this other son whom he loves, to plead for him also to come and join the family.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Rembrandt’s painting also highlights the distancing of the older son. Standing to the side, elevated above the father and his brother, he stands erect and aloof, with obvious distance between himself and them, he looks down sternly, his arms drawn in under his cloak.

Suddenly, we see the older son as a “resentful, proud, unkind, selfish person,”[[13]](#footnote-13) traits that had been deeply hidden, but growing stronger and more powerful over the years.[[14]](#footnote-14) Throughout the story the younger son has always addressed his father respectfully, but the older one in this dialogue just begins “Listen”, no acknowledgement of to whom he is speaking. Then, when referring to the younger son he says, “this son of yours”, distancing himself from his relationship with his brother. The father though, addresses him lovingly as his son, “My son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours”.[[15]](#footnote-15) He also cleverly reminds him of brotherly relationship by speaking of “this brother of yours”[[16]](#footnote-16). The resentment of the older son is a huge barrier to reconciliation with his brother. The voice of his father seeks to penetrate this resentment and affirm that he is loved by the father. “It is a voice that can only be heard by those who allow themselves to be touched”[[17]](#footnote-17) It is a voice which reaffirms that none of us deserve God’s love, all of us fail, some very publicly and others in the suppressed attitudes, which occasionally spill out.

This story reminds us of the joy of grace. It reminds us that joy and resentment cannot co-exist. It reminds us that we are all invited to share in the great celebration of life in God’s family.

These two sons remind us how we all need God’s grace and that we are likewise called to extend that grace to others.

In our church communities and in our wider community resentment is a prevalent attitude. It often manifests itself in prejudice, judgement, and frozen anger.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Henri Nouwen reflects on seeking to overcome these forms of resentment. He says, “How can I return [home] when I am lost in resentment, when I am caught in jealousy, when I am imprisoned in obedience and duty lived out as slavery.” He acknowledges that alone this is impossible. “Something has to happen that I myself cannot cause to happen. I cannot be reborn from below; that is with my own strength, with my own mind, with my own psychological insights. ...I can only be healed from above, from where God reaches down. What is impossible for me is possible for God.” `[[19]](#footnote-19)

1. Luke 15:11 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Bell Publishing, 1992) 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al. (Ed) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,*(Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995) 301 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Culpepper, “Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 301 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Luke 15:1-2 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997) 585 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Fred Craddock, *The Gospel of Luke,* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Westminster Press, 2009) 188 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Green, *The Gospel of Luke,* 585 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Luke 15:31 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Luke 15:32 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)