

Worth your weight in gold

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Readings:

Psalm 8

Luke 15: 11-32

This is one of several parables Jesus told to help us understand something about our relationship with God and how He works in our relationships with other people. It's a very down-to-earth story about a young man who thinks he knows it all, comes into some money and goes off to enjoy himself.

Where have we heard that before? How often do we hear about sportsmen, politicians or entertainers with more money than they know what to do with, who mess things up and then have the job of trying to repair the damage later?

George Best once said, when he was asked what he'd done with all his money: 'most of it I spent on women and drink – the rest I just squandered!'

But what the young man in this story did cut much deeper than just going his own way and wasting all his money...

In the culture of that time, to ask for your inheritance early was like saying to your father, 'I wish you were dead!' The young son had decided he needed his father's money more than he needed him. He may as well have said, 'I want your money but I don't need you in my life any more!' He thought he knew best and went off to live life in the fast lane.

After a time, all the money had gone and he was forced to feed pigs to earn a pittance. He couldn't even afford to eat properly any more! In the end, he realised that even his father's hired workers were far better off than he was right now. So, he swallowed his pride and went back to his family.

Jesus began telling this story to a group of teachers of the law who'd been following Him around: they were questioning Him about His habit of mixing with people that no self-respecting member of the community would be seen dead with! People like tax collectors and prostitutes... These religious leaders belonged to a group known as the Pharisees and they believed that righteousness comes from obeying a strict religious code.

Jesus knew that what He was saying wouldn't go down well with them!

When we're taught this story in school, it's normally the elder brother who is presented as the bad guy, full of bitterness and resentment. We're meant to be on the side of the all-forgiving father and the changed younger son.

But all the talk from Jesus about forgiveness was alien to the Pharisees... If everyone obeyed God's law there'd be nothing to forgive! The one character in the story they could relate to was the elder brother: he was sensible, loyal and hardworking. He didn't need to come back with his tail between his legs because he hadn't done

anything wrong! Why should he celebrate the return of his brother when he'd made such a fool of himself? Without him there would be no fatted calf to kill and eat in celebration!

Just a few moments before He started telling the story, Jesus had told them something they just couldn't understand: He said: "There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who don't need to repent." (Luke 15:7)

That made no sense to them: why would someone who goes astray and then comes back be more cause for celebration than someone who never wanders off in the first place?

A lot depends on how you see yourself! Are you one of the ninety-nine righteous people, or are you the sinner who needs to repent?

We might think we obey all the rules and kid ourselves that we keep the Ten Commandments – but as St Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians: "God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiselled stone. And when God is personally present - a living Spirit - that old, constricting legislation is recognised as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us!" 2 Cor 3: 17 (The Message)

Jesus wasn't trying to discredit the Law of Moses – neither was Paul - but on its own it's not enough. The Pharisees were using it as a tool of condemnation: they couldn't see that if we rely on the Law alone, we will all fail. Without the love of God it's just words! You can drive according to the Highway Code, keep to all the speed limits and obey all the road signs – it doesn't guarantee you'll get home safely.

If we're honest, we often fall into the trap of judging other people by our own standards: that's why so many churches have arguments between so-called traditionalists and modernisers! It's why we jump to conclusions about people who look or sound different from us. We expect everyone to conform to our way of living and when they don't, we don't always know how to react...

A man who smelled of alcohol got on a bus one day. He sat down next to a priest. The man's shirt was stained; he had bright red lipstick on his face and a half-empty whisky bottle sticking out of his pocket. He opened a newspaper and started reading. After a couple minutes, he asked the priest, "Father, what causes arthritis?"

The priest seized on the opportunity to give a moral lecture. He said, "It's caused by loose living, being with cheap women, too much alcohol, and contempt for other people!"

"Well fancy that!" said the drunk, and carried on reading his paper. The priest started to feel guilty about what he'd said, and he turned to the man and said: "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to come on so strong. I've no right to be so judgmental. How long have you had arthritis?" The drunk said, "I don't - but I just read here that the Pope does!"

The theme of today's service is people who are 'worth your weight in gold' – and the elder brother in the parable is a classic example: an unsung hero who just gets on with what he's got to do, working selflessly without grabbing any headlines. There are 'elder brothers' everywhere...in the workplace, in the family and in the church... people who are dependable and trustworthy but who end up being stuck in the background and taken for granted.

'The Damned United' is a true story about Brian Clough – the brilliant, brash young manager who took Derby County from the bottom of Div 2 to the top of Div 1 at the end of the 1960s: in the process his team overcame the great Leeds United.

Clough was controversial. His assistant, Peter Taylor, whom he valued as a friend and colleague, was much more reserved. Over time, Clough got a bit carried away with his own importance and spoke out once too often and got them both fired from their jobs at Derby.

Then came a job offer from Brighton and Hove Albion: Clough didn't even know where Brighton was! But they went to see the club chairman and they ended up shaking hands on a deal.

A few days later, the manager of Leeds took the job of coaching the England team...and Leeds offered their vacant job to Brian Clough.

It was a dream come true! He could take over the team he'd come to hate for the way they played and re-shape it to become the envy of Europe! Taylor – his assistant – didn't want to know – he'd committed himself to Brighton and refused to go back on his word. Clough told him, 'you're nothing without me – if you won't come with me to Leeds, I'll do it on my own!'

44 days later, having lost all 4 of their games with him in charge, Leeds sacked him and he had to go back to Brighton to plead with his former assistant to take him back. Eventually Taylor did, but not before he'd reminded him that actually, it was Clough who was nothing without him!

This story has some parallels with the story of the Lost Son: there are similarities but it's not the same – and in life, it won't be! One of the interesting things about the story Jesus told is that there's no real ending: He leaves it hanging – we have to carry it on ourselves...

So, what is Jesus telling us about God – and what is He telling us about ourselves? Human relationships can be complicated! God is constant – but people aren't!

Think for a moment about what it is that brings you to church...there may be as many different answers as there are people here...all our circumstances and our life stories are different! But the amazing thing is – whether you've been a faithful member of this church for years, or if you've walked through these doors for the first time in your life, or maybe you've returned after a number of years away – God loves each one of us just the same. It's amazing...even it doesn't seem very fair!

Thank God the kingdom of heaven isn't very fair – at least in our terms. Because if it was, we'd all be measured and judged.....and we'd all stand condemned!

Jesus isn't telling us we have to be perfect! There'd be no point: it's something we're not capable of achieving.

But He invites us into this little story so we can continue it for ourselves: what would you do if you were one of those 3 people in that situation? None of them is perfect either! They all show something of the good and bad side of human nature!

And because of that, it's not easy to work out how things will move forward...things never happen exactly as we expect them to: not when there are people involved!

Did they all live happily ever after? The father said to his elder son whose nose was understandably out of joint: "You don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything I have is yours - but this is a wonderful time and we have to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead and now he's alive! He was lost and now he's found!" (Luke 15: 31-32 (The Message))

We don't know what happened next. Did the elder brother come round to his father's way of thinking and forgive, or did he continue to sulk...? Did the father offer stern words of warning to his younger son once the dust had settled? Or did he put the whole thing to one side and carry on as if nothing had happened? And the young man - did he stay on the farm working diligently from dawn till dusk? Or did his love of the high life lead him to start saving as much he could and gamble it all away again? We don't know....the choices were theirs.

We all need to face up to the choices we make - because when we do something we know is wrong, we're doing exactly what the younger son did! We're saying to God, 'I don't need you right now: at this moment, all you're doing is giving me a moral dilemma I could do without. I'm going my own way - I can do better without you!'

That may not be what we mean but it's what we're saying! It's like a knife to the heart every time we do it. And then when we later come to regret what we've done, we offer our confession and expect Him to take us back - and He does! Time after time after time...Grace upon grace upon grace: the slate is wiped clean...all our imperfections understood and accepted.

So does that mean God lets us do whatever we want and then says, "All is forgiven" just because we get down on our knees and say we've changed? I saw a definition recently of a modern day Christian: someone who goes to church on Sunday to ask forgiveness for what he did on Saturday and what he will do on Monday!

If we're not expected to be perfect, what does He expect of us?

In Luke 6: 37-38, Jesus said, "Do not judge others and God will not judge you. Do not condemn others and God will not condemn you. Forgive others and God will forgive you. Give to others and He will give to you. The measure you use for others is the one that God will use for you." (Good News Bible)

Are we prepared to deal with each other's faults...in the same way that God deals with ours?

We're not perfect and we have to find ways of dealing with other people who aren't perfect either. If you're behind the wheel of a car, you stand a much better chance of getting where you're going safely if you understand that you make mistakes and so does everyone else!

In life it doesn't mean allowing people to walk all over us: we don't do anyone any favours by letting them think that whatever they do is all right. But it does mean addressing problems, forgiving, allowing ourselves to be forgiven and moving on.

That's the challenge Jesus puts before us....He requires us to go beyond human ways of thinking. We become righteous in His eyes, not because of anything we've done but because He chooses to share His table with sinners - with us! The very thing the scribes and the Pharisees were complaining about is what keeps our hope alive...our

hope in the living God: not just rules carved in tablets of stone or printed on sheets of paper. We're all in need of His grace!

The challenge that Jesus gave us is to give something of God's grace to other people, just as He gives it to us: to show love to the person who repeatedly lets us down! To the one who takes the credit for the things we've done! To the person who is hurt us or someone close to us! Jesus expects this from us because that is what He does for us... over and over and over again! Grace upon grace upon grace! And just like the 3 characters in the story of the Lost Son, the choice is ours...