

I imagine that most of you here grew up with a sibling or siblings.
Even if you didn't, I'm sure you'll understand what I'm about to say:
While you were growing up was there ever a time when you were angry
With your brother or sister?
Or that you thought that your parents treated you unfairly,
And let your brother or sister get away with, or even rewarded them for,
Doing the wrong thing?
Maybe then you couldn't even look at your brother or sister,
Or stand to be in the same room as them.
And maybe even now you have strong feelings
As you contemplate the injustices that you remember.
But now suppose that, as you were feeling your
Angriest and most hard done by,
You found out that your brother or sister had died,
Or that they were lost, and you'd never see them again.
How would that have made you
Re-evaluate your anger or your sense of injustice?
How would you have welcomed them back home?

If you can tap into this feeling,
Then I think you are in a good place to receive today's parable from Jesus.

Because in today's reading there are three evaluations given
Of the younger son's situation.
The older brother says that he wasted his dad's means of sustenance
On prostitutes, and that deserves punishment.
The younger brother says of himself
That he sinned against heaven and against his father, that deserves reparations.
But the father? He gives the most severe evaluation,
That changes completely how the younger son should be received:
He says that the younger son was *lost* and *dead*,
And so that they *had* to celebrate,
That there was *no choice* but to celebrate when he was found,
When he came back to life,
When he came home.

OK, let's hear how the text begins: **Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'**

What do you think the reason for their grumbling is?

It seems to me that they are grumbling because Jesus

Through his welcome of the tax collectors and sinners

Gives the appearance of approving of their behaviour.

The Pharisees and scribes knew that Jesus denounced sin strongly,

Including their own sins,

Let alone the more obvious and outrageous

Sins of the tax collectors – that is, in this historical situation,

Of the greedy, self-serving opportunist collaborators with the Romans.

So what's going on?

The text says: **So [Jesus] told them this parable**

In fact, Jesus goes on to tell three parables about the lost being found.

The parable that we have today is the third in the sequence.

Jesus is getting the Pharisees and scribes to consider

That the spiritual situation of the tax collectors and publicly known sinners

Is much worse than they think,

And that Jesus, in welcoming the tax collectors and sinners,

As they come to listen to him,

As they come home to God,

Is a cause of celebration, not of grumbling:

The lost are found, the dead are received back into life.

This is how the parable begins: **'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them.**

One way to think of this is the situation of a traditional farm,

Where the dad's sons have grown up and are ready to take on

More responsibility: that the dad is moving into retirement mode,

And handing over the running of the property to his sons.

The text says that the father divided up his property between them,

As becomes evident as the parable goes on, between the brothers.

The 'property' here, by the way, evidently means something like

What we would call his superannuation:

His means of sustenance: he is handing over the farm, that supports him,

To his sons, expecting that he will be supported by their use of the property.

But what happens next? **A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.**

The younger son takes all that would support the father in his old age,
Travels far away from those who would reign him in,
And blows all that he has freely received in wild living.

By the way: if you had asked that young man at the time
Where do have more fun: in the distant land living it up,
Or back home working with dad?

I think we know what his answer would have been.

It makes me wonder about people who leave God's family the church,
And live off the spiritual capital of the faith,
Without a concern to what this means for their brothers and sisters in the faith.
It's not evident to me that they think they are doing anything wrong,
On the contrary, they may even have a feeling of liberation,
Of finally being unrestrained from doing what they've always wanted to do.

But in the parable, the capital runs out, and that's not all:

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him any[thing].

The time of reckoning is beginning for the younger son,
And the situation becomes so desperate

That not only does he end up feeding pigs,

Which is the lowest of jobs for a traditional Jewish person,

He is also considered to be less important than swine

To the very people with whom, while he had money, he lived the wild life:

Without his money, the younger son is worth less than an unclean animal,

And they think that the pigs deserve better food than he does.

Then the change of heart begins: **But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!**

Is his first thought how he hurt his dad?

Or how he has been living sinfully in God's sight?

No: his first thought is that there is food at home,

That his dad knows how to treat hired hands better than these locals do,
And that he's hungry to the point of perishing.

His motivations are hardly spiritually pure,
But he forms a plan couched in spiritual terms: **I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'** " So he set off and went to his father.

I think at this stage we are meant to understand
That the younger son still doesn't realise the gravity of what he did to his father,
Or what he did to his brother, or how he sinned against God.
He knows he is *hungry*; he has a plan; he heads home.

Nevertheless, the language of *getting up* and going,
Especially in the Greek does, have resonances of *the resurrection*:
Literally, he *rises* and goes to the Father: this is a resurrection verb.
So the parable signals that even with these mixed motivations,
The younger son is now on the path of death to life.

Then we hear this: **But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.**

The details here suggest that the father is looking out for his son:
He sees him while he is *far off*.

And the father is then filled with *compassion*:

This is a divine word: a word used in the gospels
Of God the Father, of Jesus, and of God the Father of Jesus
As they are portrayed in Jesus' parables, as we have right here.
So: this looking out, this compassion, this embrace and kiss,
This is what God is like: this is who we have in *Jesus*.

Then the younger son begins his speech.

But think of how the context has changed: he is making this speech
Not just as a hungry person, *but as someone warmly welcomed home*:

Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

The response that the father gives is an emphatic statement

Of the younger son's continuing place in the household: **But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet."**

The robe, the ring, the sandals,
These are all markers that the younger son is received home
Not as a servant or a slave, *but as a true son*, and the father goes on: **And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!** And they began to celebrate.

It is not just that the younger son is being received back into the household,
It is that his return is a cause for true celebration:
The dead one is alive, the last is found.

But the parable is not over: **‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in.**

The text does not yet spell out *why* the older brother is angry:
Or why he refuses to go in.

We have to enter into his character,
And to think about things from his perspective, to feel what he would feel,
And to keep our ears open to how the parable develops.

This is what we hear: **His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”**

Note again how the father moves graciously to his son:

He puts what could be considered propriety aside,
And *goes out* to his son, and *pleads* with him.

The older son wants his father to listen to him:

He sees all this celebration and feels hard done by.

He has seen himself as a slave in the household,

He feels that the father has been stingy with him,

And that the younger son, whom he refuses to call his own brother,

Is received with such celebration.

I can't help but feel that the older brother wonders

Whether he *truly is* his father's son,

Whether his father does love and care for him, or for justice.

But the father says words of the greatest comfort and assurance: **Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."** '

The father assures the son that he is no slave,
But that as a son he has the true freedom of the household,
That *all* that is the father's *is indeed his*.
He then assures him that the younger son is indeed his brother,
But that the situation was worse than he thought:
His brother had not just wasted money:
Whether in prostitutes or not,
He had not even just sinned against his father and God,
The father says again,
And this time to the older brother in his anger and resentment,
That the younger son was dead and lost,
But is now alive, and so a celebration was the only fitting response.
And there the parable ends: we don not know if the older brother
Comes home and joins in the celebration,
Or stays outside trapped in his anger and resentment.

I'll close today with one comment:
Sunday by Sunday God brings us home to be with our brothers and sisters.
We remember that it's *fitting* and *right* that we give thanks to God,
And that we celebrate that meal that Jesus himself started
On the night before he died.
Jesus came to rescue us, who were dead and lost in our sins,
And he brought us into the household of God,
Where he feeds us with the true bread of life,
And where all that we have is his.

So, let's receive the compassion of our Lord Jesus,
And celebrate with the angels of heaven,
Whenever anyone turns back to God,
When the dead are raised,
When the lost are found,
When our brothers and sisters *come home*.
In Jesus' name. Amen.