

MWA Devotional Paper

Jesus the Storyteller

Read Luke 15:11-32 - The Prodigal Son



The story of the Prodigal Son, as it is often named in our Bibles is probably one of the best loved parables that Jesus told. It is certainly the longest and it is very dramatic. Because it is well-known many people see it as having only one proper interpretation and it is difficult to challenge that idea but I am going to try!

The usual 'proper' interpretation is that the father in the story represents God, we are represented by the younger son, who leaves and then returns and is welcomed back with great delight by his father just as God always welcomes us with open arms.

But the parable doesn't end there. Surely if the above interpretation was Jesus' main or only aim, he wouldn't have continued with the story. If you cast your mind back to our September paper, you may remember that parables often have three characters and the focus is on this third character. In this parable we very definitely have a third character – the eldest son who is not at all happy about the welcome his younger brother has received.

The eldest son feels very aggrieved. He has stayed on the family farm working hard for it seems very little reward, he describes himself as a slave, whilst the younger son went off enjoying himself – for a while anyway. It is important to understand just how badly the younger son has behaved. In asking for his inheritance from his father, the younger son indicates that he does not really care for his father, indeed some biblical commentators write that his actions imply that he wishes his father to be dead. The younger son's actions bring shame on the family and shame was something to be avoided at any cost in the culture of Jesus' time.

Shame was one of the reasons, some of the religious leaders objected to Jesus welcoming outsiders. Earlier in the chapter that contains our parable, Luke tells us that tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to Jesus. The religious leaders did not like this, Luke records that they grumbled saying: 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Jesus' actions of welcoming and eating with such people brought shame on him.

Jesus' response is to tell three parables: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin and The Prodigal Son. In each parable, something or someone is lost, something or someone is found and there is a party. A party which the whole neighbourhood joins in – except in the Prodigal Son, one person does not join in – the older son, for reasons we have heard about above.

MWA Devotional Paper

Jesus the Storyteller

The father tries with the older son – he assures him that he is his beloved son, that he is part of the family but to no avail. The oldest son responds to his father negatively and the parable ends with a question. Did the oldest son accept his father's invitation to the party? From the parable, we just don't know.



One message of this parable is to tell us that there are no slaves, prodigals or inhabitants of a far country. All are children of God, all belong to God, their loving parent.

Another message is Jesus' defence of his association with those considered to be sinners. The parable challenges the religious leaders – you are behaving like the oldest son – are you going to put your prejudices aside and come to the party alongside whoever God has invited? Because God is going to continue to invite sinners.

But it is also a challenge to us, there is no room for any sense of superiority over the religious leaders – are we willing to join the party or will we hover on the outside complaining about the guest list?

For Discussion

1. The two pictures on the paper are by an artist called Jorge Cocco. They are entitled The Prodigal Son and The Two Prodigal Sons. Following on from what you have read, do you think calling the parable 'The Prodigal Son' is the right title for the story? What would you call it?
2. Can you think of examples of people who the church doesn't seem to want to welcome or hasn't welcomed either now or in the past?
3. The younger son finally recognises what he had all along – are there times when you have taken what you have for granted and forgotten to be thankful?