

The Prodigal Son

On Friday, President Barack Obama gave a eulogy to one of the victims of the Charleston shooting, Reverend Clementa Pickney. If you've seen it, and it's been doing the rounds on social media, you'll know that at the very best, this will be the second best sermon this weekend. I wasn't here this morning. It was part eulogy, part political speech, part sermon in the great tradition of Southern Baptist, along with singing and little organ riffs. The highlight was singing verse one of Amazing Grace, and I cannot urge you enough to seek it out on Youtube.

Grace features quite heavily in the bible reading we've just heard from – the story of the Prodigal Son.

This is the big hitter of parables – the phrase the prodigal son has become part of the English language. It's a really well-known story, retold in a host of different artworks. Going chronologically, it appears enormously in Medieval art, Rembrandt painted a work entitled 'Return Of The Prodigal Son', Arthur Sullivan (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame) wrote an Oratorio about the story, Prokofiev composed the music for a ballet of it, and Benjamin Britten wrote an opera entitled The Prodigal Son. Add to that songs by The Rolling Stones, Iron Maiden, and Kid Rock. Amongst others.

Indeed, it's one of two parables that feature in two books entitled “must-know stories from the bible”. Any guesses as to the other one? Right, the Good Samaritan.

So that's the difficulty for me – is there anything more to be said about this passage.

Well, I think, or at least I hope, that sometimes familiarity with a plot can mean that we don't really appreciate quite how radical some of this story is. So I'll go over the main points, and perhaps, no promises, tease out some of the details that we've become over-familiar with.

It is, of course, a parable of two halves. And as ever, the context is important. At the beginning of the chapter, we're told that Jesus was talking to tax-collectors and sinners, and that Pharisees and scribes were also there, muttering about the company Jesus was keeping. What this parable does is speak to all of them.

Someone once described Tony Blair's quotation when he was shadow home secretary 'tough on crime; tough on the causes of crime' as the perfect soundbite, because the first half appealed to the Daily Mail, and the second half appealed to the Guardian. Well, he was only really using Jesus's trick displayed in this parable, whereby the first half appeals to half of his audience, and the second half to the second. The tax-collectors and sinners are, in one sense, the lost, who in their very action of listening to Jesus are in the process of returning to God. The Pharisees and scribes are the resentful older sibling, outwardly obeying all the commandments of their father or their God, but, it turns out, lacking a brotherly love. I'd like to suggest that we, at different times, fit into both groups.

So, let's start by looking at the first half and some of those points that we take for granted. The request, firstly, is extraordinary. The younger brother is owed a third of his father's land when the father dies – he may be resentful that the older brother traditionally got two thirds – but the crucial fact is when his father dies. It's not just an audacious request, it's unbelievably rude. It would be rude in today's society; in a time when parents were more honoured than they are too, it's unfathomably insulting. I can't be bothered to wait for you to die, so give me your money (which you might need) now.

I thought about finding out how rude this would be today by phoning my Dad to get his reaction, but I'm afraid I wimped out.

And, more incredibly, the father gives the money to him. Last time I preached, I talked about the abundance of fish that Jesus provided for the disciples after his resurrection. In Philip Yancey's book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, there's a reference to the story and the film of *Babette's Feast*, which is a fantastic visual metaphor for the abundance of grace. And here we have the abundance of the father's generosity. He gives his son the money to do as he wills. I don't think God is in the business of giving us money. But we see His generosity every day in terms of what we've been given in the way of gifts and talents, friends and family, and of course love that sacrificed his Son, "that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Perhaps most relevantly to this story, He has given us free will – the ability to make life choices, which is what enables the younger son to squander his new-found wealth so wildly. And in terms of the society we live in, we could probably each scrape together enough money to waste on wild living.

So we know the story from here. An incredible request, an incredible reply, and an incredible waste of that money.

As we read on, I think it's quite easy to differentiate ourselves from the young brother by comparing our shortcomings with his. Wild living could mean anything (it's actually his brother who mentions prostitutes), but it involves losing all his money, so it's not something that many of us have indulged in. But that doesn't necessarily make us any closer to God – not without the absolution of Jesus, anyway. Because the perfection of Jesus sets the pass rate for God at 100%. It's not a comforting thought, but we all fall short, and from Josef Mengele to Nelson Mandela, from ISIS to the ICRC, we all fail...I appreciate that's a bit of a hell'n'brimstone message, but I'm pretty sure it's true. So we may not have indulged in the lifestyle of the young son, but we're all well short of the perfection that Jesus represents.

So, let's look at the return of the son, after the humiliation of working with unclean animals, and reduced to wishing that he could at least eat the slop they were given.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

When I lived with my parents in Esher, our next-door neighbours were a couple called Don and Mary Spurgeon. Don was the great-ish grandson of the great Victorian 'prince of preachers' Charles Spurgeon, so for purely sentimental and entirely illogical reasons, I've always had a respect for Spurgeon. It was therefore quite pleasing to find, when researching for this sermon, that he's also a heck of a writer. His sermon, available online, entitled *Prodigal Love for the Prodigal Son*, is well worth looking up, and concentrates on the last line of this verse. According to Spurgeon, the true translation of the Greek is not simply 'kissed him' but 'kissed him much', and Spurgeon goes on to speak at length on the different meanings this kiss has: love, forgiveness, restoration, joy, comfort, strong assurance and intimate communion. It's well worth reading the whole sermon, by the way.

There's a few Spurgeon-inspired things I'd like to mention about this moment of union, where the father kisses his son much. We don't know where the son has been, but we know that he is starving, presumably tired, probably dirty – physically and emotionally shattered as he approaches his father's house. We're used to the phrase 'give him an inch, and he'll take a mile'. The father's action is the reverse of this. His son inches forward, his father runs the miles towards him when he is still a long way away. In Spurgeon's words, "Slow are the steps of repentance, but swift are the feet of forgiveness." And this is true for us – we take the inch forward of making confession and God grants us the remarkable absolution just like that. Suddenly, our sins are swept away.

It's also pointed out by Spurgeon that this reconciliation with the father takes place before the family meal, and in this church's context, this is why we have reconciliation with our Heavenly Father before we share the Church Family meal of Holy Communion.

So, the older son, slaving away, suddenly hears music and dancing. Well, not exactly slaving – when his father says everything I have is yours, it's not the airy sentiment of the Billie Holiday song. It's a statement of fact – the younger brother has taken his inheritance, so what remains is technically all the older brother's. So he's not going to be living on the bread-line.

But the real issue here is self-righteousness, and this is why this part of the parable is so relevant to the Pharisees in the crowd. Later on in Luke's gospel, we hear the story of the tax-collector and the Pharisee, where the Pharisee says 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector'. And this is not the only time when Jesus criticises self-righteousness – not by a long way: in Matthew's gospel, chapter 23 is subtitled Seven Woes to the Scribes and Pharisees, because they revel in acts of religious adherence but ignore the spirit of God's law. Paul is also big on self-righteousness, for example his comments in Romans about the Jews' self-righteous trust in circumcision. In his letter to the Galatians, he tells the Galatians that, if righteousness could come from their own actions, then Jesus died 'for nothing'.

I don't think any of us are completely free of self-righteousness. I know I'm not, and it's a difficult line to tread, because we have been blessed by God in many ways. I was told when I was young that if ever somebody asked me 'who on earth are you' in a dismissive way, I should answer 'I'm the co-inheritor of the kingdom of God and all the riches therein'. Thankfully, I never took that advice, or I'd probably have a broken nose. But it is true. And all of us are in that wonderful position of being part of the Kingdom of God. So it's perhaps not surprising that we think that somehow how we act has got us into that position of God's love. But it's not our doing. It's because of Jesus' sacrifice, we can place our sin on him, rather than try somehow to be good enough for God. Only in the cross can we see the grace that covers all our sin and defeat that tendency toward self-righteousness.

I think there are elements of us, or at least of me, in both the brothers. I was chatting with Stuart yesterday about what I was intending to say, and he wondered how much of us is in the father role in this story. I'd love to say that we all have that prodigal love that Spurgeon describes, and perhaps some of us could be as gracious if we had rebellious children. But I think the figure of the father, as representative of the Father, is an aspirational alternative to the true us as represented by the sons.

I'd like us to think a bit more about God's love as illustrated by this parable by singing. And we'll sing The Lord is Gracious and Compassionate. But in honour of Barack Obama and to think about the grace that underpins this story, we'll sing verse one of Amazing Grace first.