

## 16<sup>th</sup> June 2024: The Trinity (3) 'The Lovesick Father' (Luke 15:11-32)

Today is Father's Day and mention of our own human fathers will no doubt prompt a range of responses among us. Some of us will have had great fathers, ones who modelled the kind of strong but sacrificial love we see here in this story. Others will have had terrible fathers, perhaps even abusive ones, and can't hear the word father without a stab of pain in their heart. Most of us, I imagine, will be somewhere in between. We had *normal* dads, with strengths and flaws. We can celebrate the good bits and acknowledge the less good bits.

And often the image of our human father dominates our perspective of what it means to call God Father. Jesus insists that this is a name we can – in fact *should* – use for God, he puts it at the heart of the prayer he gives us, one many of us use every week, even every day; and it's meant to convey the true intimacy that all of us can enjoy with God. But I recognise that many people find that hard, and our journey to understanding the true fatherhood of God is a challenging one.

Yet, I think it's also true that in the conversations I've had with many people about this, even when human fathers fall well short of the divine ideal, most people carry an image of what an ideal father *should* be like, one which is remarkably close to what we see here in this story.

Even as we remember our human fathers today – either with joy or sadness, or perhaps a bit of both – we want to acknowledge right at the start that part of **the journey of our spiritual life is learning to be the child of a divine Father**.

But what does a father look like? What are the qualities of the Father in this story? The one-word summary would be: **love. Unconditional love**. In fact this story, and ministry of Jesus as a whole, shows us that the *only sort of love is unconditional*. Conditional love – love which expects something in return, makes demands – isn't really love at all. True love endures, and is able to keep giving of itself despite circumstances. The Father in the story is one with endless love and patience, who waits expectantly at the edge of his land for his wayward children to come home.

But love's a hard word to pin down. So let's put a few more details on what the love of the Father looks like. We can see four key qualities of love in this famous story:

**The first is freedom** – and this appears right at the start. The younger son comes to Father and makes the ultimate insult: 'Dad, I wish you were dead'. i.e. I want my money now, and nothing more to do with you. If you were the father, how would you respond? I think of times when one of my children has come to me and asked to buy something which I consider to be a waste of money – I quite often said 'no'. Here, the son asks for the *whole* inheritance.

One of the hardest things to accept about God is that he gives us freedom. That sounds strange: most of the time we like freedom... except when it has bad consequences, and then we expect God to stop it. We want freedom when it suits us, and not when it doesn't. At one level we can't have it both ways – but from God's perspective, true love gives freedom to the one it loves. God the Father allows us to be free, that one day we might freely choose to love him in return, as he loves us.

**The second is welcome**: and this can be seen most movingly in the way the Father responds to son's return: (v20) '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. Many of us as children live or lived in fear of our parents' disapproval, or of being punished. And this younger son had the right to expect the mother of all punishments. (4 million years on the naughty step.)

But what he finds instead is forgiveness, welcome. It's not that the past doesn't matter. It's that the Father's love can overcome the past. The past does not have to determine the present or the future. The Father's welcome here points us to the cross, the supreme place where God suffered, in order to welcome all those who had wandered far from home (and which we'll focus on later)

When we say sorry to God, for example in confession, we need to picture this image of the Father. I think many of us pray that prayer, imagining God standing over us with a cane, just about to unleash it, and then reluctantly putting it back on the desk again (maybe arms folded). But this parable is Jesus' image of what God is *really* like: when we return and say sorry, what does he do? He runs and kisses him! When we pray a confession prayer, can I encourage us all to picture this image of the lovesick Father: it will transform your understanding of what's going on.

**The third is blessing:** the unconditional love of the Father leads not just to the desire to offer freedom and welcome, but also the desire to give. It is striking how the Father's first thought is not himself, but for his son; not for his own hurt or righteous anger – it's quite simply eclipsed by sheer joy at the renewed life of the one who had caused him so much pain. And this desire to bless manifests itself in the Father's radical, scandalous generosity: (v22) 'Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.'

The robe and the ring echo the old story of Joseph: his father Jacob gave Joseph a robe to indicate his favour; Pharaoh gave Joseph a ring as a sign of authority. The sandals tell us that the son remains a son – servants did not wear sandals. Intimacy, favour, authority – this is what God the Father offers to all of us. We are all prodigal children, but God in his grace wants to bless us.

**Finally, the fourth dimension of the Father's unconditional love is celebration.** In many ways, this is the natural conclusion: (v23) 'Let's have a feast and celebrate.' True love is always an invitation to joy. Not escapism, because it recognises that there is sorrow, too – the son's return is birthed in pain, even if self-inflicted. But love chooses joy over cynicism, and celebration over punishment or resentment. That's why the most common metaphor for heaven is a feast, a party. It's not a disembodied existence learning to play a harp on a cloud, it's a knees-up.

So these are the qualities of love: freedom, welcome, blessing, celebration. The love that God the Father has for each of us prodigals, *and* each of us uptight elder children. **God wants us to be free, he welcomes us back, he blesses and he celebrates. This is what God is like.** And if only we could really believe that, I think most of society would become Christians immediately.

But there is a postscript: as we receive, so we become. We take on the family likeness. We are to become freedom-bringers, welcomers, people who bless generously and compassionately, and people who call others into God's eternal celebration. That is the journey of a lifetime, but it is the journey we are to take if we are truly to be Christ's followers. Most of us probably feel a long way from seeing ourselves as Fathers or Mothers in the spiritual sense. And that's OK. But that is our ultimate call. Freely you have received, Jesus says – now freely give.

Straightaway it's obvious that we couldn't possibly do this unless we receive freely from God. We can't manufacture compassion – we need to keep receiving the life of the Son in the power of the Spirit – in short, we need the Trinity! But today, as I close, I want us all to fix our spiritual eyes on the Father in this story – see his hands of welcome, of blessing, of celebration. *This is what God is like.* May that touch our hearts, may that draw us to Himself. And, may that ignite in us a desire to pass that blessing on to others. Amen.