

SERMON – 30/3/25
'The Parable of the Prodigal'

Luke 15:11-32

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.”
(Luke 15:17-20)

When did you last use the word 'prodigal' in a sentence? You might have used its cousin 'prodigious' but neither are particularly common words and never were. They both originate in English in the 15th century from the Latin word *prodigere* meaning to drive away or squander but in English they somehow acquire a strong sense of enormous quantity. The word 'prodigal' doesn't actually appear in today's Bible reading even in the King James translation but it will be in association with this parable of Jesus that it is most familiar to most of us.

I'd like to reflect with you this morning not only on the enormous quantity of his father's money that the younger son in the story squandered, nor even only on the enormous quantity of money and possessions that the father was generous with, but also on the enormous quantity that the older son shunned, whether consciously or unconsciously. There is a picture here of what we as Christians make of the grace of God – God's prodigal, prodigious generosity – and I want to take all three characters in the parable and invite you to ponder this morning which of the three you most resemble and what you might learn about yourself and about what is required of you at this stage of your journey through life.

Any of us who have been brought up in the church or been around the church for any length of time will be very familiar with this story. It is one of the best known of the parables of Jesus and if we were ever put on the spot and asked to recount it, most of us would make a pretty good go of it. But it's one thing being able to tell the story and quite another to learn its lesson (or indeed its lessons, for there are many layers to it. So let me try

and shine a light on it for us this morning with a view to taking something significant away with us today as we go from this place.

I want to start with the father in the parable for it is he who represents God and it's always good, I think, to start with God. I want to call him the Prodigal Father today because I want to highlight the way he lavishly squanders his not insignificant worldly wealth. When his young son asks him for his share of the estate, even though there isn't the slightest hint that the man is anywhere close to death, he doesn't even seem to blink before he has divvied up his property so that the young man can have his share before time. He doesn't hesitate to squander what he has, even though he might have suspected that the younger son would just waste it, because (as we discover later) it is in his very nature to be generous – even his servants have food to spare so he must have treated them very well indeed. And his prodigious nature goes beyond just money. After his son leaves home we learn that the father kept a lookout for signs of him on the horizon, and when he does come back we are told that he is full of compassion, he receives him with open arms and smothers him with welcoming kisses, reclothing him and laying a feast for him. My friends, this is our God, our Prodigal God, our lavishly generous God, our gracious God, who calls us to be like Him. So this is my first question – am *I* like that?

Hold that thought, because I want to move on to look at the younger son in the parable, the eponymous Prodigal Son, who represents us (all of us) in our waywardness. Let's take a look at the ways in which the spendthrift wastefully fritters away what has been so freely given to him. It has probably been his dream as he has grown up in a wealthy family to make his own decisions about how to make the most of what he has all around him and when his father entrusts it to him it is no time before he is up and off. The bright lights beckon and he heads for what we are told is a distant country where he feels he can throw off the shackles of home and family expectations. It's illuminating to be told that he squandered *his* wealth, because he has no sense that it has been entrusted to him by his father or that he has any kind of responsibility for it. He is quickly caught up in what is described

as 'riotous living' and in an instant he has spent everything. He obviously has had no sense of the value of what he has been given, until he no longer has it and for the first time in his life he discovers what it is to be in need, compounded by the fact that there is a famine in the land, everyone is struggling and no-one gives him anything. In fact he is at risk of starving to death and it's when he finds himself a job as a pig herd and is dependent on sharing the pigs' food for his own survival.

Which takes me to my second question – am I able to recognise my own waywardness and that by nature I am just like the Prodigal Son, turning my back on the generosity of the Prodigal Father and at real risk of heading blindly for rock bottom?

And keep that thought too, while thirdly we consider the older son, whose part in this parable is often sidelined. I can't really give him a name like the Prodigal Son or the Prodigal Father because he is the one who represents the absence of what is prodigal and as such he is like the many many people in this world and even within the church who simply don't 'get' what grace is. Perhaps the older brother is the Unprodigal Son, although even if that was a word I don't think it really helps us grasp the issue. It seems to me that he just seems completely blind to his father's generosity. He watches his younger sibling break their father's heart as he rides off into the sunset, and maybe we shouldn't be too hard on him for staying loyal and obedient working on the farm while the Prodigal is away pouring his money down the drain. But when the Prodigal returns and the father rejoices and lavishes his joy on the younger son, the older son is angry and bitter and jealous – he will not even come in and join the feast. When his father goes out to plead with him and to try to explain to him why he *has* to celebrate and be glad at the return of the Prodigal, all the years of frustration come pouring out of the older brother's mouth. "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." (v.29) Can't you just hear the bitterness. But I wonder whether he had ever *asked* his father if he could have a party. From what we know of the Prodigal Father, he would have granted that wish in a heartbeat. Are you like the older son, the Unprodigal Son,

needing the scales to fall from your eyes like Saul after his Damascus Road experience?

I hope that, for all its familiarity, this wonderful story has made you stop and think this morning. First and foremost I hope it has reminded you (or perhaps even shown you for the first time) what the Lord is really like. Hear this and hear it well. Our God is infinitely prodigal, lavishly generous, compassionate and gracious and abounding in love and mercy. Draw near to God today, to the Prodigal Father who is even now watching for your return, to Jesus who like the nurturing mother hen we read about a couple of weeks ago longs to gather us like chicks under the shelter of her wings.

If you recognise that you have been wayward and that you have got lost, then come to your senses like the Prodigal Son. Return to Him and confess your sin and humble yourself before Him and you will surely find forgiveness and welcome. Those words with which I began this sermon are words that we each need to make our own, for they represent the way of salvation in Christ. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father."

But equally if that is not you, then don't be like the Unprodigal Son either. If you think you have been faithful and obedient but actually feel like you have been slaving for a tyrannical master, look again and see God for who He really is. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." (Matthew 7:7,8)

So, whether we have received from God's generosity and squandered it or whether we have never really recognised God's kindness, let's take hold today of the prodigal love of God and let us reflect it in our own dealings with others that God's Kingdom may come in all its lavish fullness.