

## Sermon.2025.03.30 Lent 4

I'm sure we've all heard plenty interpretations of the parable in today's gospel.

Often it's seen as the story of a foolish young man who wastes everything he has, his wealth, his talents, his time – whatever it may be, then realises his mistake and returns penitent to receive forgiveness. So it becomes essentially (and rather moralistically) a story of folly and forgiveness; or even rebellion and - despite everything – being welcomed home. This understanding follows naturally from the other parables in this part of Luke's Gospel – the lost coin and the lost sheep.

The famous early 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss theologian Karl Barth gave the parable a very different interpretation. For Barth it was the story of the eternal Son of God who gives up his princely status and leaves his father's home to journey to a far country – the world, with all its follies and wickedness – and for the sake of this world wastes everything he has, even in the end his own life; and is then welcomed back to the home of his heavenly father. So Karl Barth developed his whole understanding of Jesus Christ, his Christology as we say, on the basis of this parable. It was a very interesting and creative way of understanding the parable itself – and Barth wrote very expansively on this.

I want to suggest another approach again – that maybe this parable is a story of exclusion and self-exclusion (which may in the end be much the same thing). At the

start, both sons, older and younger, are included in this family. We're not told about where the mother might be, or what she might think of this whole interaction. Like most of the parables, it's pared down to convey something. It's minimalist, in other words. And I expect in the ancient middle east, as in much of the middle east even today, women were relatively invisible in the sorts of public spaces where Jesus told these stories.

But back to the story itself. Both sons are included, until the younger decides to exclude himself, take himself out of this situation and go and see the world, live his own life. This is exactly what we expect young people to do – not to stay at home with their parents forever. In fact we think there's something wrong if they want to stay home. In our own time, with increasing rents and house prices, it's actually becoming a problem – both parents and children may want time and space to themselves, but the costs may be prohibitive for the kids to leave home. In the case of the young man in the parable, who knows his motivation: maybe he realises that, as his father says quite explicitly later in the story, everything the father owns is going to belong to the older brother. There might not be all that much in it for the younger brother when the father eventually will die and leave the farm to the older son. This is just speculation on my part, but I think feasible as a motivation. Maybe the younger son feels already excluded in some way, and he responds by further excluding himself – deciding to go away. And to do this, to implement this plan of

action, he excludes his father – by asking for his inheritance. He treats his father as if his father were already dead. So there's a mutual exclusion going on there.

Then of course there's the wasteful life in the distant country – this is where Karl Barth's interpretation makes a lot of sense. The world had indeed distanced itself from God, and God reaches out to the world in his son, just as the father reaches out to the prodigal, wasteful son on his return home. There is the party for the returning younger son, but now it's the older brother who feels excluded, and whose response is – just like the younger son's earlier response – to exclude himself even further.

This son of yours, he says! (Not this brother of mine, note). I haven't been invited to the party – well I'm not coming anyway! The father feels excluded by this rebuff, and pleads with the older son to come in. He can't seem to do anything right, as a parent.

The ending of the story is left open – it's a choose your own adventure. Does the older son come in for the family reconciliation; or does he remain outside in a huff? This is another thing we're not told.

Isn't this the reality of our separation from God, of our life in the distant country of our world, that we feel excluded in all sorts of ways and we struggle so hard to feel included? But we fail to notice the areas of life in which we are included – we take these for granted. At times we even reject these inclusions, and we exclude

ourselves. Like the father in the parable, we just can't get it right; whatever we do is wrong, to someone important to us. And our response is to exclude ourselves even further.

The good news told, and demonstrated, by the teller of this complicated and convoluted parable, is actually very simple: it is simply, you're included. Get used to it. Accept it. Don't exclude others; don't exclude yourself!