

THE GOD CHARACTER

The beauty of a really good parable is that it meets generations of listeners wherever they are – in first century Palestine, in fourth century Rome, in sixteenth century Geneva, or in twenty-first century Victoria. Everyone has a weird family. Everyone has at least thought about running away from home. And whether or not you happen to have one yourself, almost everyone knows what a pain a sibling can be – especially when there are only two of you, so that the *good child/bad child – white hat/black hat* thing hovers over you no matter which one you happen to be at any given time – certainly our two children switch places regularly! For these reasons and more, the parable of the prodigal son stays young no matter how old it is, giving all kinds of people all kinds of ways to make the story their own.

The problem with a really good parable is that it can become limp from too much handling. Like the velveteen rabbit, it can lose its eyes, its whiskers, and a lot of its stuffing, until it conforms to the arms of whoever picks it up. After a while, you hardly have to hold it anymore. You can just sling it over your wrist, with the head on one side and the body on the other, trusting it to stay put while you go about your business. That's how you know you don't have a live parable anymore – you no longer have a parable capable of leaping from your arms and leading you out to where you did not mean to go. You have a domestic pet instead, as captive to you as you are to your culture.

Hearing this parable can be like hearing from a long-time friend. Strong memories rush in, and we are eager to resume conversation with a familiar voice – a tame voice. This offers opportunities and challenges. Chances are we already connect to this parable in meaningful ways – we have found our space within it and allowed it to speak to us already. The challenge lies in discovering newness in the story – the undomesticated message. If we think we already know what the parable is about, or think that it only means a couple of things, then we can close ourselves off to its depth. How might we open our hearts and minds so that this word may once again light our path in a meaningful way?

Perhaps we need to approach it first from the admittedly peculiar perspective that William Loader uses in his retelling named *A Bent Tale about a Dog...*

Dogs know. In a moment she was off, tail high and wagging its crooked shape vigorously as she bounded down the path. Moments before all was still, just a twitch of the nose scenting the air.

Six months back it was different. Shouting, slammed doors, curses, a kick and then a yelp. He was gone, bag in hand. And she was cringing in pain by the step. It was lucky the tail had not snapped right off. She was badly bruised.

He had gone, nobody knew where. Off to make his fortune, anything but home, anyone but family, and away from that damn dog. It's just that jobs weren't easy to come by. Streets are not friendly. Parks are sometimes cold. Down he went, caught in the spiral, used, abused; promise and hope turned to hopelessness and despair. There was nothing left: back home! Give it a go again.

And she saw him coming afar off, caught his scent. Now nothing was stopping her. She bowled him over with one great leap of love. She wee-ed in ecstasy just to see him. As she licked him with affection, he broke down and wept.

Nothing more needed to be said. Barking enthusiasm, she announced the homecoming, annoyed brother from the cricket on TV to get up and see, jumped up and licked him too – and fetched the ball.

She knew. God knows dogs know.

In this recasting of the parable it is clear from the title that the important character to watch is the dog – the dog's behaviour is the most significant. Our parable today is normally called *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* but Jesus begins with: *There was a man who had two sons.* Both sons in the story matter – both are lost – and the story is more about the father character anyway.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep is not about the lost sheep. All the sheep ever did was get lost. The parable is about the passion of the shepherd who lost the sheep to find the sheep. His passion to find and to celebrate is what drives the parable. *The Parable of the Lost Coin* is not about the money – it didn't get itself lost! The parable is about the persistence of the woman and her enthusiasm to share the news when the coin is restored. In our story today it isn't the Prodigal's lostness – wasting all his money on wine, women and song in the far country; it isn't the elder brother's uprightness – his grouching and complaining and score keeping that stands against him. What counts in the parable is the father's unceasing desire to find the lost sons – both of them – to raise both of them up from the dead – to celebrate their recovery.

The story begins with the father having two sons and the youngest comes to the father and says, "*Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.*" So the youngest son gets the money and the older brother gets the farm. And off the younger brother goes. What he does, of course, is he spends it all – blows it – on wild living. When he is finally in want and working – slopping hogs for a farmer and wishing that he could eat what he's feeding the pigs – he can't stand it. When he finally comes to himself he says, "You know, I've got to do something. How many hired servants of my father's are there who have bread enough to spare and I'm perishing here with hunger? I know what I'm going to do."

In our twenty-first century world, there is nothing remarkable about a young person deciding to leave home to go seek a place and fortune in the world. South of the border it has been called *The American Dream* – the rugged individual as national icon. The younger son did what young people are born to do. He may have hurt his father in the process, but his father understood, since he may have done the same thing himself.

The son fell short of the dream, but all was not lost. In place of worldly success, he won wisdom – returning home to beg his father's forgiveness – which his father gave him before he asked. The boy who was lost to his father was found. The son who was dead came back to life – restored to his family and to his father's love.

Told in this way, the parable is indeed the parable of the prodigal son – a story about sin and repentance – about our individual relationship with God. When we decide to go home and say we're sorry, we too can be sure that a banquet waits – an improbable feast given in our honour by one whose divine grace exceeds all human reason.

It's a perfectly good story – a particularly North American Protestant one perhaps – which is fine for those who want Jesus to be more like us. If we want to be more like Jesus, however, then it is worth wondering how the story might have been heard in its original context.

First we need to recognize that the son affronts his father. His request for his part of the inheritance is out of line – the equivalent of wishing his father dead. The son could have expected a share of the family estate, a much smaller piece than that due to the elder son, but only upon his father's death. Nothing compels the father to grant the request.

Second, although we see the father as a great parent he would have appeared recklessly indulgent in his own time. Because the son's request would bring such shame to the household, granting it actually makes the father appear foolhardy – not generous.

Just as we may misunderstand the interactions between father and son we may misunderstand the boy's return as repentance when it could just be one more ill conceived plan for his life. Does the younger son earnestly repent, or is he a manipulative scoundrel?

He says, "I will go to my father and I will say, *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you...* That's true. *I am no longer worthy to be called your son...* also true. But the next thing he says is dead wrong: *treat me like one of your hired hands*. He knows – thinks he knows – he can't go back as a dead son, and so he says, "I'll go back as somebody who can earn my father's favour. I will be a good worker – reliable, honest, following all the rules." This is not repentance – it's just a plan for a life.

The rehearsed speech smacks of insincerity – a plan designed to tug at his trusting father's heartstrings. Perhaps Jesus' point is that even scoundrels are joyfully welcomed in God's household. Just pointing oneself toward home is what unleashes God's welcome.

What happens next is that the father is now sitting on the front porch of the farm house and he sees the younger boy, coming down the road from far away. He sees him coming – rushes off the porch – runs a half mile down the road – throws his arms around the boy's neck and kisses him.

When the father embraces the boy who has come home from wasting his life he appears recklessly credulous. Dignified men in Jesus' culture would not run like this man does. Clearly the father longs for the son's return, greeting him before hearing a word – the boy never gets his confession out of his mouth until after the kiss – until after the embrace. He does not wait for his son to express contrition before restoring him to full status in the household – symbolized by the robe, ring, and sandals.

Confession is not a pre-condition of forgiveness. It's something that you do after you know you have been forgiven. Confession is not something you do in order to get forgiveness. It's something you do in order to celebrate the forgiveness you got for nothing. Nobody can earn forgiveness. The boy knows he's a dead son. He can't come home as a son, and yet in his father's arms he rises from the dead.

The dead son, the no-good Prodigal, is home. He has been raised by his father's embrace. He has done nothing to earn it, but now all that matters is that the father has called for a party to celebrate the finding of the lost and the resurrection of the dead.

Jesus' parables of grace often end with a party. When the shepherd finds the lost sheep, he doesn't go back to the ninety-nine – he goes home and has a party with his friends in order to celebrate the finding of the lost. The father's desire to party is what the parable is all about. It's the father – the God character – who drives the parable.

Is this what grace looks like? Is God's grace a grace so eager to give and restore? Won't those who value responsibility and propriety consider it dangerously permissive?

The party is in full swing when the elder brother shows up. He arrives to hear the music – to see the dancing – to dodge the waiters carrying roast veal platters with all the trimmings. The older brother is angry – will not go in – will not join the party – he demands an explanation.

Is the elder son right or wrong? He surprises us by breaking the pattern set by the two parables earlier in the chapter. One sheep was lost while ninety-nine stayed together. A woman searched for a coin while holding onto nine. But both sons in this family are lost, including the one who never left home.

As soon as the elder son appears on the scene we sense his alienation. No one bothered to call him in to join the party! He does not enter the house – does not address his father respectfully and speaks about “this son of yours” instead of “my brother.” The elder son forces us to digest just how scandalous the father's actions are – his response to the younger son which has utterly confounded the rules, doctrines, and convictions that confine the elder son.

This elder son's problem is that no one asked him whether he wanted to be reconciled with his good for nothing brother. No one asked him how he felt about being known as the prodigal's brother – wearing the second best robe. The elder son is the good son – he has done everything right and he isn't about to sit down at the same table with the self-centered, pig-loving, sin-sick brother who has cost his family so much grief.

Is the elder son right or wrong? By his own estimate, he is in the right. And many of us – deep down at least – we might see things in similar ways – according to similar standards of fairness and belonging.

We fall into a trap when we write off the elder son as different – as an outsider – as especially reprobate and self-righteous. He is the perfect religious insider – he understands and articulates *the scandal* of God's grace better than any theologian.

The elder son refuses to come in the house – a terrible insult to his father – right there in front of everyone. What the father should do – according to protocol – is to stay at the head of the table – ignoring his elder's son conspicuous absence. But you already know this father, right? He does not cast the elder son away – he goes out to his good son the same way he went to his bad one.

Both sons – each in their own way – misunderstand the workings of grace. The younger seeks to bargain or manipulate – the elder cannot let go of sacred canons and grudges. Yet both are welcomed home. For this father reunion and reconciliation is all that matters – he just wants to find the lost and bring them home – to bring the dead to life.

Meanwhile, there is a banquet going on. You can go to the party as you are – as long as you don't insist on staying that way. Can you catch the savoury scent – hear the music and the dancing...?

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2010