**Luke 15:1-32**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3So he told them this parable:

 11Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ 20So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.25“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

## 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

16From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

**A family to belong to.**

Over the last couple of weeks there has been a surge of unity around the country. There have been inter-faith services where, Hindus and Buddhists. Muslims and others, stood side by side with people of different Christian denominations, as well as people of no faith at all.

At one level it has been lovely to see. World Religions have been seen as a dividing influence in the world and to see people of difference coming together united against terrorism has been encouraging. Our news is sometimes dominated by friction which involves people of different faiths. Hindu and Muslim over the province of Kashmir, Buddhists driving Muslims out of Mynmar/ Burma. And then, there’s the Palestinian and Jewish conflict. Some of the people crossing the Mediterranean in dinghy boats will be Arminian Christians driven out of Syria. Historically, the breakup of the old Yugoslavia was a bloody ethnic and religious division – where people known as Christians committed atrocities and of course the catholic/ protestant tensions in Ireland are not too far away in our history

However, despite what divides there is also truth in a commonness about us. There are similarities between people. We all have a mother, a family, and we all breathe air. In terms of Religious views, we are people of faith. We are people who gather in different ways for worship. We pray, we have sacred texts. We believe in a God or gods and our faith leads us to behave in certain ways.

Where are things heading? Are we heading to a melting pot where all religions become one? Does it not matter what you believe so long as you’re sincere?

I remember a talk about 12 years ago by someone who I thought was far too liberal at the time. They were into inter-faith dialogue and I remember him saying that no one was helped by trying to boil all the religious views into one. For him, the place of dialogue was in being confident in our own faith and presenting that, while listening openly to the contents and practices of people of different faiths.

Our scripture today from Luke 15 on the outreaching heart of God is one of our most loved, treasured stories which reveals truth about God. I am not sure if there are parallels, in other Religions. All I know is that, in the Christian tradition, here we have something awe inspiringly beautiful – and challenging at the same time.

The parable of the prodigal son, or the prodigal sons, or the love sick father, is a lovely one. It is set in the context of teaching about how God seeks us out like a good shepherd looking for a lost sheep or a woman searching for a lost coin. The image changes to one of a God who is like a father who waits, and waits with open arms for his child to come home.

This parable is laced with lots of Jewish Cultural content, and yet we relate to it. Jesus was criticized because he let sinners listen to his teaching. The Pharisees and scribes criticized: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.

So Jesus painted a picture of what God was like. Welcoming sinners – the younger son – asked his father to give him his inheritance now – in other words – Dad I want to treat you as if you are already dead. With his inheritance, he leaves home and goes to a far off place. Where do Gentiles – non-Jews live? In far off places, so he went and partied with the Gentiles. Good Jews were to have nothing to do with them. They were un-clean, un-holy – the great unwashed. So, the younger son abandoned his family, his culture, his morality and his faith when he left home. He blocked them out of his life. And all was good, until the money ran out and a famine hit. Then he was forced to be a slave of a Gentile and feeding pigs – Pork was forbidden in the Law of Moses. A Jew feeding pigs was the ultimate disgrace.

It was then, that he came to his senses. He remembered home and with that family and culture and faith. He decided to cut his losses and head home. You can imagine what would have been going through his mind as he made the journey: with nothing, in rags, almost starving to death. ‘Maybe, if I’m lucky I’ll be able to be a slave for my father? At least I would be alive, at least I’d live to tell the story. But I no, I’m not even worthy of that. I’ve eaten and drunk with sinners, I have been one of **them**. My Religion makes me an outcast. Probably my father will kick me out and leave me for dead, after all, I treated him as a dead man.

Stop – consider yourself as a parent. What would you do? Put yourself in the place of the father. Consider, your child has turned from everything they were raised to be. This child rejected everything the Father stood for. He gave the big finger to everything that was precious in his up-bringing, family and culture. How would you have reacted when you saw your child far, off and hobbling toward you? Would you even have been looking for them? Do you have a line? Once crossed, there’s no coming back – well, not without conditions?

So, let’s allow the actions of the Father to sink deeply into us. ‘…while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.’ Yes, the child was repentant, he had his well-rehearsed speech planned.  ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father didn’t wait for an explanation, he didn’t wait for the son to admit he was wrong, before a word could be said, he was filled with compassion, he ran to him – Jewish patriachs didn’t run – hugged and kissed him – that’s a very cultural thing to do! He didn’t listen to his child’s plea to be received as a slave, instead he got his slaves to re-dress him including a ring on his finger, and he called for a feast to be prepared to celebrate. Because, this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’

The older brother arrived home and got in a huff. He’s been the good child; it just doesn’t seem right. How come his father hasn’t thrown parties like that for him? Well the ability to party, enjoying the best of his father’s wealth was always there, but the older brother had misunderstood his relationship with his father and he had never taken time to enjoy it. At other times I have pointed how one reading of this parable is to see it as primarily about the older brother, but today I want us to sit with the father and his youngest son.

The word gospel simply means good news. Here, we have the gospel, as astounding good news. No matter how far we stray, no matter how much we treat God as being dead, betraying the way of the father, still He waits for us with open arms; still his heart breaks with compassion when he sees us. Despite all, he receives us when we turn and come home. We do not need to fear that He will have a list of hoops to jump through. At the gate we won’t find a list of conditions to fulfil before we can enter. When we approach our love-sick Father we are received with joy and celebration. If here today any feel as though they have walked or drifted from the Father and are hesitant to return, we need not worry, the welcome mat is out for us. Maybe its not a wholesale rejection of God? We can all have areas of our lives which are resistant and ignoring the presence of God. Will we come to Him with everything?

The Father gives us such a beautiful picture of compassion and grace – let’s not ignore it. When we think of it we want unconditional love. We need it, in it we are welcomed home.

We need this and want it for ourselves. But what about for others? The challenge has already been made to consider ourselves as the Father in the parable. If that is not challenging enough, how about we consider the church as the Father? If we hold that God has no hands now but ours, if we are his hands and feet, then we are saying we are like the loving Father towards others. If we want to be loved ourselves then we cannot live lives which are unloving towards others.

This is a wonderful segway into neighbours’ day. But first consider that we don’t even have to step outside the recognised family of God. Many churches have a sign up which say’s “all welcome” – really?

Of course churches are not set up to cope with those who prey on others, but aside of excluding predators – for good reason – is the welcome mat really out? Are children only welcome in the church’s family if they are quiet? And parents or grandparents, are they only welcome if their children or grandchildren are seen but not heard? Oh no, we can’t have children with behavioural issues now can we!?

Then there’s music – are people only welcome if they like to sing the music we like?

Then there’s personal things like: tattoo’s and piercings, body odours and clothing, let alone gender

Under the surface, what if people have personal issues, challenges with mental health even? Do we have to pretend to be perfect to be welcomed in God’s family?

In reality then, are we good at welcoming, or do we only welcome those people who are like us?

We want to be loved, but do we want to love in the same way? Being the face, or the hands and feet of Jesus in the church is challenging enough. Today we have neighbours day. Its been running for ten years now in Aotearoa and for about 5 times we’ve had events at Blundell Park. For those who can’t go, please pause to pray for the event between 12 and 2 pm. For those able to be there for a little while or for the whole thing, we go with the only agenda of being neighbourly and showing the love of God. A smile, a wave, a friendly welcome – Hi how’s your day going? Do you live close to here? How did you hear about neighbour’s day? If they are there with family – who’s in your family…? I’m not good with opening questions, you’ll do better than me. My standard line might be: well the rain has stayed away, how long do you think that will be for?

We have a message of reconciliation to live God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting sins not holding people to account. That is wonderful good news. But before we can introduce people to the God of reconciliation we are to first be reconcilers.

Pray. First for those who need to know they are loved by God and then for us as we love as Jesus loved.