

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 27th March 2022
The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Collect

Merciful Lord,
you know our struggle to serve you:
when sin spoils our lives
and overshadows our hearts,
come to our aid
and turn us back to you again;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

2 Corinthians 5:16-end

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

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-end

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable:

'There was a man who had two sons. The 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. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But 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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So 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. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us

eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But 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." '

Sermon

I wonder whether it would make a difference if we could hear this parable from the mother's perspective. It's impossible to know why it is that we hear only about the father and his two sons. It's one of the reasons that parables can be so powerful – they are not only stories that we can enter into, but also stories of which we can ask countless questions. And because the events did not really take place, we can envisage all kinds of answers to those questions, and ask ourselves what difference it would have made.

On Mothering Sunday it seems appropriate to ask ourselves what could have been different if we had heard something about a mother's perspective.

Shall we try out some ideas? After all, there is no universal mother's way of seeing things. Mothers come in all shapes and sizes, with all kinds of personalities, so it's worth playing around with the story and seeing what we might discover.

Perhaps the mother didn't play a particularly dominant role in the household. From the way that the father behaves towards his sons, it is hard to imagine that he was anything other than loving towards his wife. But perhaps she tended to fade into the background. The sons looked to their father for guidance in life. He was their role model – and probably also the one that they rebelled against. When the younger son decided to leave home, it didn't cross his mind to ask what his mother would have thought or felt. And likewise the elder son didn't consider the impact that his resentment might have.

Or we could imagine the very opposite end of the spectrum. That actually the mother was not only dominant, but unpleasant. The love that we see the father showing may have been in direct contrast to the way that his wife treated her sons – and probably him, too. Perhaps the younger son left home because he had simply had enough of her harsh words. Maybe his mother was constantly playing the brothers off against each other. All that the younger son heard was how much better the elder son was. And he simply had enough.

In such a scenario, we can almost imagine the mother's incredulity at her husband's willingness to welcome back the younger son. Perhaps she saw her husband as weak; a pushover. And maybe the elder son's hardness of heart was fed by a resentful, mean-spirited mother.

On Mothering Sunday, though, perhaps we should consider a different alternative altogether. Perhaps we can envisage a mother who could have actually transformed this situation.

When Jesus tells the parable, he does so because the scribes and pharisees are criticising him for welcoming tax collectors and sinners. He is inviting them to look closely at themselves. He is asking them to see what love looks like and dare to join in.

I wonder whether a mother in the parable could have helped her sons to interpret the love that their father was showing. Could have done for her sons what the scribes and pharisees so desperately needed, too.

So what if this was the kind of mother who really could see what was happening. Who knew and understood. She looked at her younger son, who was so different from the elder son. He didn't have

the same discipline; the same innate desire to follow in his father's footsteps. He couldn't help comparing himself with his brother – and feeling inadequate. He just had to get out of there. To try to find himself. And she probably knew, too, as her heart broke at his departure, that his attitude wasn't right to find himself. That he was far more likely to lose himself. But she knew, too, that her husband would never abandon him. Would still welcome him home.

I wonder whether she tried to explain to him at times how much he was loved. How much he was valued for being himself. That he didn't need to compare himself to his brother. That his parents never compared them, but rather loved their differences.

If she did explain those things, perhaps that is part of what he remembered when everything went wrong. Perhaps that is why he dared to come home, knowing that he could be rejected, but daring to believe that he might not be. Because his mother had always told him how much they both loved him.

And if that is the character of the mother, perhaps we can also imagine her recognising the pain of her elder son as the younger son returns. The father lavishes his attention on the returning son, and while he still has time for his eldest, the mother can see that the resentment is too deep. As the story ends, perhaps she goes to find her eldest son and helps him to see that he continues to be loved. Helps him to feel the love that his father has expressed. To understand that it really is possible that both sons are loved equally.

And perhaps it is the mother that the scribes and pharisees need. To help them to recognise that the story of the elder son is a story for them. That the tax collectors and sinners may represent everything that they despise. But that there is space in God's heart for everyone. That God can love those differences in our personalities. That God can see in us what we fail to see in ourselves, and longs for us to see ourselves and one another from that perspective. That God longs for us to know that just as the mother's love holds both her sons, with all their differences, so we are each held in God's love, as the people *we* are too.

Amen