

Becoming the Father

a sermon preached on the

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Joshua 5:9-12, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

What is it about this man who had two sons? For the father, in spite of the exceedingly unhelpful and pious title given this story in so many bible translations, is in fact the central figure in this drama. What is it about this father who apparently needs to have two very different sons? Or, to sharpen the question further: What is it about this father who apparently only comes to know who he is as a father because of the diametrically opposed behaviour of his two sons? For that is what happens in the story.

But perhaps it is necessary to back-track through the story itself before attempting to answer the question, since the story is both overly-familiar, as well as overly-pious and overly-moralising. The interpretation of this story laid onto children, a heavy yoke, is almost entirely moralising – 'when we do bad things, if we repent appropriately God who is loving will accept us back even though we don't deserve it'. We know this pitch all too well - so much so that it's almost impossible to hear the story in any other way!

"There was a man..."¹ Here is a father about whom nothing is known, and who, within in the context of the story, knows nothing about himself. The man expresses no self-consciousness, no self-knowledge or reflection about himself. All we know is that he has two sons. Two, not three or one, but two. Are the sons the same? Oh no, most certainly not! One son is a bad boy. The other son is a good boy. That's the essence of how we compare them – which is, presumably, the motive of the story-teller. But how is it that the father has two such different sons? Isn't that a question we often find ourselves asking about other people's families, or possibly even our own? How can two such diametrically opposed sons be the fruit one man's loins, to employ the non-prudish language of the Hebrew Scriptures?

Well, in spite of the fact that there may never be a singular satisfactory explanation for the origin of such opposites of personality, the first thing we do learn about this father is precisely this: that he himself has created such opposites. As his progeny, his two sons, it is reasonable to infer, are both accurate reflections of some aspect of himself. So in moral terms, because his progeny are both good and bad, he himself is both good and bad. But in the context of the story this fact remains unknown about the father until it is expressed outside himself, in his two sons. We only know about these two opposing aspects of the father because we see their visible expression in the sons – because one part of the father recklessly squanders the property, the other dutifully guards the property. So now we know something of vital importance about the father!

But what makes this parable so memorable and so healing is what happens next. Now conscious of these two previously-unconscious opposed parts of himself, the father acts to include them both at the great banquet. The bad son is welcomed because having been lost to the father and now found this is cause for great rejoicing.² But could it be that the son was already lost to his father, long before the son went off to a foreign country with wild women and partying?³ After all, why

¹ Luke 15:11

² Luke 15:22-24,32

³ Luke 15:13

did he leave in the first place? Perhaps it's not only the son who was lost, but the father who had 'lost' some part of himself, indeed a vital part of himself? Which might shed some light on the curious fact of the father's standing at the window looking into the distance, watching and waiting.⁴ Or to same the same thing in slightly different terms, perhaps the father now knows some part of himself previously unknown?

Then we find that the good son is welcomed to the banquet too. Now we might say, yes of course, that's obvious. But in the context of the story it's not so straightforward. The good son is in fact too good for his own good. He is so good that he has become consumed with self-righteousness and resentment, angry and refusing to enter the party.⁵ Could it be that the father has now also become conscious of *this* previously-unknown aspect of himself – a goodness that is too good, a black-and-whiteness so incapable of seeing tones of grey, which it is bound to fuel self-righteousness, resentment and anger?

So what the father now sees, acted out in the behaviour of his two opposing sons, is the two sides of himself of which he was previously unconscious – and which on their own were bound to be one-sided. This is the surprising revelation about the father: the father is split; he has two opposing aspects, which he can only bring together, in the symbol of the banquet, by their expression in his two sons. Which means that the sons serve the purpose of healing the split within the father himself! The banquet – a momentous symbol which should ring bells in the ears of those who come to the Table of Christ in the eucharistic liturgy – is only possible because of the making visible and consequent healing of the split within the father. And it is the father's determination to include both sides of himself at the banquet which is the enacting of the principle of Love.

As for the two sons, their part in the enacting of Love is the acceptance of each other. The banquet can only be fully realised by their mutual consent and presence to each other. They have made the previously-unknown opposites in the father visible, conscious. They have carried half of the burden of one-sidedness, unconsciousness, of the father. For only the two sons could make the father visible, conscious, to himself – which is the paramount work of salvation, evolution. Having done so, now, under the influence of the Divine Love, their task is to embrace each other as the two equally-vital aspects of the father. Or, in terms of the imagery of the parable, they are both needed for the sake of the great banquet – which is an image of the completion, the wholeness, the fulfilment of purposes intended by the Divine Love.

So both sons, in fact, are 'coming to themselves'.⁶ And, paradoxically, the Father is coming to Himself too! Or, in St Paul's image: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Godself."⁷ Or, in the language of the liturgy: 'Blessed are we who are called to the banquet of the Lamb. Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be made whole.'

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⁴ Luke 15:20b
⁵ Luke 15:28
⁶ Luke 15:17a
⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:19a