



**St Mark's  
Review**

A journal of Christian thought & opinion

**No. 223, February 2013 (1)**

# **Promise and Fulfilment**

**Preaching the Prophets and Luke's story of Jesus**



# St Mark's Review

No. 223, February 2013 (1)

## Promise and Fulfilment

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Editorial  | v  |
| Preaching from the Minor Prophets<br><i>Jeanette Mathews</i>   | 1  |
| Performing Habakkuk<br><i>Jeanette Mathews</i>   | 13 |
| Preaching Luke's Jesus<br><i>Geoff Broughton</i>   | 17 |
| Lukan Lenten study guide<br>Towards a healing ministry<br><i>Tom Frame</i>   | 25 |
| Sample Study Guide<br>Lukan Lenten study guide: towards a healing ministry – week one                                      | 31 |
| Preaching conversion in Acts<br><i>Russell Warnken</i>   | 42 |
| The Spirit of promise<br>Preaching from Acts<br><i>David Neville</i>   | 51 |
| Preaching on Luke–Acts<br><i>Simon Smart</i>   | 67 |
| Preaching Luke 15 in different contexts<br><i>Geoff Broughton</i>  | 73 |
| 'We are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation,<br>so be reconciled' (2 Corinthians 5:20)<br><i>Rebecca Newland</i> | 80 |
| Open arms<br>(Luke 15:11–32)<br><i>Sallyanne Hart</i>  | 85 |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Talk for the funeral of Tyler Piper from Luke 15</b> | <b>92</b>  |
| <i>Andrew Taylor</i>                                    |            |
| <b>Does theology have a place in pastoral ministry?</b> | <b>95</b>  |
| <i>Rebecca Newland</i>                                  |            |
| <b>Book Reviews</b>                                     | <b>101</b> |
| A journey into another faith                            | 101        |
| Debating homosexuality and the church                   | 104        |
| Salvation: is it child's play?                          | 105        |
| Good, but not catholic enough                           | 109        |
| Controversy and conciliation                            | 111        |
| Luke, the trinitarian theologian                        | 114        |
| An invitation to think                                  | 116        |
| <b>Letter to the Editor</b>                             | <b>119</b> |

# Editorial

‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’

According to Matthew’s Gospel, this is the essence of John the Baptiser’s opening proclamation (Matthew 3:2). Mark’s and Luke’s Gospels bear this out: ‘And so John came, … preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mark 1:4). Matthew and Luke record another essential element of the Baptiser’s message: ‘Produce fruit in keeping with repentance’ (Luke 3:8).

‘Repent, and then produce fruit in keeping with that repentance!’ Whether they had come out from metropolitan Jerusalem or were from rural Judea, those who went to see and hear John the Baptiser should have understood fully his firm injunction to produce fruit. They knew about growing fruit on the vine, good crops and poor returns, vine-dressing, harvesting and the ever-present risks posed by the climate and by predatory animals and voracious birds.

John’s first listeners also knew about the depiction of Israel as God’s vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–7, Psalm 80). They knew about the failure of their own forebears to produce the fruit required by their God in response to his demonstrations of divine mercy and heavenly generosity.

Jesus, in his metaphors as well as in his parables, drew heavily on the imagery of the vine, of vineyards and of people working at different times of the year in the vineyards. He even made a direct link with John’s preaching in the so-called ‘Parable of the Two Sons’, those who were directed by their father to go and work in the vineyard (Matthew 21:28–32). ‘For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness’, he said, referring to John’s injunctions to repent, and then to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The force and effect of Jesus’ words are unmistakable: ‘Do as the Father has directed. It is not sufficient to give lip-service to the Father’s commands; the will of the Father must be obeyed.’

‘Repent, and then produce fruit in keeping with repentance!’ These two injunctions remain central to the messages every preacher should be conveying into the new church year. But for those of us charged with proclaiming these messages in the affluent and increasingly urbanised West, the use of

imagery that depicts the production of fruit is probably more picturesque and poetic now than relevant and polemical. A continuing challenge for the followers of Jesus is to re-present the truths of God's Word while using language our audiences are able to hear and figures of speech which to them become real.

The focus of this issue of *St Mark's Review* is predominantly on preaching the word of God in the current church year, namely, Year C in the *Revised Common Lectionary*. The emphasis in this issue is on Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, with two contributions from Jeanette Mathews addressing the mode and meaning of Old Testament prophecy.

In the recent past *St Mark's Review* has presented papers designed to guide and to contribute to preaching during Years A and B ('Fulfilling the Law: Preaching Matthew and Moses' for Year A in *St Mark's Review* No. 216 and "The Way of the Lord": Preaching the Psalms, Mark and the Catholic Epistles' for Year B in *St Mark's Review* No. 219).

The current issue, like those which have preceded it, draws its contents mainly from the annual preaching seminar conducted by St Mark's National Theological Centre. In this issue of *St Mark's Review* we are fortunate to have an additional paper from A/Professor David Neville which complements his earlier study, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me": Preaching from Luke in Year C', which appeared in *St Mark's Review* No. 213.

May you be spiritually inspired and your preaching reinvigorated as you read this issue, and may there be much fruit borne as a consequence of your applying what you learn.

# Preaching Luke 15 in different contexts

**Geoff Broughton**

The passage in Luke that serves as a ‘core sample’ in this essay is the parable told by Jesus of the Prodigal Son. Luke 15:11–32 is among the most influential and perhaps best loved of all the parables Jesus told. It seems to encapsulate the entire Christian message.

The parable has been painted by a host of artists, most notably by Rembrandt. It has provided the themes for plays (most notably those of Shakespeare), has been set to music and most recently has served as the subject of motion pictures. The parable’s central themes of rebellion and return vividly capture the lost nature and longing for home that characterise the human condition.

Three ways of preaching from the parable in differing contexts follow:

- A Sunday sermon by Rebecca Newland titled “We are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, so be reconciled” (2 Corinthians 5:20);
- A baptism address by Sallyanne Hart, titled ‘Open arms (Luke 15:11–32);
- A funeral talk by Andrew Taylor titled ‘Talk for the funeral of Tyler Piper from Luke 15’.

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Three interpretive approaches to Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son highlight some strengths and limitations of different models of engaging with Luke's Gospel. The first interpretation favours a *historical* focus, such as by Joachim Jeremias and NT Wright. The second interpretations have a *social, cultural and political* focus, such as by Kenneth Bailey and Christopher D Marshall. The third interpretations explore the *theological and practical elements* of the story, such as by Eduard Schweizer and Miroslav Volf. 'Public theology' or 'theological ethics' might also describe this third approach. While this paper is limited to these three approaches to the parable, a great diversity of approaches which originated with the Church fathers and are evident in the work of modern philosophers including Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) may be found.

### **Interpreting Luke 15:11–32 within its historical setting**

The first task of any preaching claiming to be biblical is dealing with the historical context in which the text was written. Throughout the last century a number of leading scholars considered Luke's historical detail to be unreliable. A large number of scholars both in Britain and on the Continent, however, took the contrary view. The English New Testament scholar CK Barrett was one of the leading voices insisting that Luke's account as a historical record should be treated with respect.<sup>1</sup> Joachim Jeremias from Germany and NT Wright from England are two prominent New Testament scholars whose integration of history and biblical study in their interpretation of the parable are consistent with Barrett's approach. A brief survey of each interpretation reveals the strengths and limitations of a historical approach.

Jeremias argues that Jesus' story is 'good news to the despised and outcast', not only because 'the parable describes with touching simplicity what God is like: his goodness, his grace, his boundless mercy, his abounding love' but because the parable is 'a vindication of the Good News in reply to its critics'.<sup>2</sup> His approach displays the strengths of the historical-critical approach without some of the excesses. Jeremias insists this parable is not an allegory. His interpretation is fully attentive to Luke's grammatical choices and the historical and cultural context of the story, the structure of the narrative and its deeper theological significance. Since Jeremias produced his historical reading (and it was not unduly critical), other similar approaches have constructed a 'fresh reading of first-century Judaism' believing that the Jewish context of Jesus' life and teaching was neglected or misunderstood.<sup>3</sup>

According to NT Wright, a leading proponent of this fresh reading or ‘new perspective’, such an account highlights Jesus’ role as a prophet so that his teaching *and* his actions are remembered.

Wright’s unique interpretation of the parable in Luke 15 typifies a ‘Jewish’ reading of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> He claims that the prodigal son ‘is the story of Israel ... the exodus itself is the ultimate backdrop: Israel goes off into a pagan country, becomes a slave, and then is brought back to her own land. But exile and restoration is the main theme. This is what the parable is about’.<sup>5</sup> Although Wright incorporates aspects of the cultural background in the story, the focus of his inquiry is the historical question. It focuses on how ‘Jesus is reconstituting Israel around himself’.<sup>6</sup> Wright argues that his ‘paradigm’ not only makes sense of the parable but more importantly ‘fits perfectly into the ministry of Jesus’ (dramatically, historically and theologically) because ‘in telling this story, [Jesus] is explaining and vindicating his own practice of eating with sinners: his celebratory meals are the equivalent, in real life, of the homecoming party in the story’.<sup>7</sup>

A clear benefit of historical work is the inter-textual connections between Jesus’ parables in Luke 15 and equating them to the overarching stories of Israel and Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Jeremias and Wright, along with Barth and like-minded interpreters, conclude that the parable of the Prodigal Son is Luke’s ‘gospel within the gospel’.<sup>8</sup> The limitation of the historical approach is that the parable loses its specific meaning in its original cultural, social and political context, which is equally true for allegorical interpretations that highlight the human predicament and the dynamics of personal forgiveness and reconciliation.

### **Interpreting Luke 15:11–32 within its social, cultural and political setting**

The biblical scholar Kenneth Bailey has led the recovery of the social and cultural background to the parable of Luke 15 by facilitating an interpretation fully cognisant of the original context.<sup>9</sup> Bailey’s approach highlights the cultural dissimilarity between the first hearers and the contemporary hearers of the parables. The background he provides is now widely accepted and has been developed by other interpreters.<sup>10</sup> Examples of his insights include the portrayal of the son’s request as effectively wishing his father was dead; feeding pigs in a far country for a Gentile employer as a depiction of the son’s ultimate disgrace; the shame brought upon the father by the son’s *return*;

the excessive magnitude of the party suggested by the killing of the fatted calf and the disgrace brought on the father by the elder son's public dispute.

According to Chris Marshall, who has considered the benefits of interpreting the parable from a restorative justice perspective, the cultural analysis provided by Bailey overlaps with several of the distinctive aspects of New Zealand Maori culture.<sup>11</sup> His discussion of the role of shame in the parable is particularly pertinent, given its prominence in restorative justice and Marshall's application of this parable for notions of offending and restoration as 'prodigious justice'.

The advantages of more culturally-nuanced readings of the parable are twofold.

1. the cultural background restricts the range of meanings for the parable in its original context and offers a safeguard against *spiritualising* its meaning; and
2. the socio-cultural context can deepen the interpretation of the text and suggest ways to interpret the text in new contexts, such as Marshall's reading of the parable in a Maori context.

### **Interpreting Luke 15:11–32 within a theological and practical frame**

A social and cultural analysis of the parable of the Prodigal Son is indispensable to its proper interpretation but does not exhaust the possibilities for extracting its meaning. The parable is not just one that Jesus *told* but a story that Jesus *embodied* because 'Jesus himself is the parable of God'.<sup>12</sup> Eduard Schweizer does not think the historical and cultural meaning of the parable of the Prodigal Son can be 'frozen' in time because it is 'a story given to us and starts to live in us'.<sup>13</sup> The question before us in preaching from Luke 15 is not primarily an intellectual puzzle for theology. The best sermons on the parable will demonstrate that the character of God is that of the forgiving, reconciling, restoring father.

Our preaching must not only be rigorous in dealing with the relevant historical and cultural contexts; it must also be able to convince those living as homeless people in Sydney's inner-city that an alternative exists to the religious, cultural and economic exclusion they experience as a daily reality.

<sup>14</sup> In order that this story might live in its hearers, Jesus goes to his cross.

Schweizer highlights Jesus' words from the cross that effectively demonstrate his embodiment of the parable.

As is noted in the paper, 'Preaching Luke's Jesus,' the prayers of Jesus leading up to his death – in the garden and from the cross – form a crucial role in Luke's presentation of Jesus' death. Yet, they are easily overlooked by historical approaches (which measure such words against their so-called criteria of authenticity) or social and political interpretations (which appear embarrassed by Luke's over-spiritualised account of Jesus' death). Schweizer's approach affirms the historical, cultural *and* theological interpretation of Luke 15:11–32.

Miroslav Wolf's interpretation of the parable as four 'acts' in the drama of embrace – opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms and opening the arms again – demonstrates that attention to the literary and performance aspects of the text serve to deepen and extend the model of interpretation provided by Schweizer. Drawing on the image of the father's embrace, Wolf makes the following theological claims.<sup>15</sup>

1. embrace is the image of God's 'embrace' in the 'overarching narrative' of the Scriptures;
2. embrace is the invitation of God-in-Christ in which 'the arms stretched of the crucified are open' denotes the achievement of the cross; and
3. embrace as a 'metaphor for reconciliation' is the concrete expression of the father's embrace of the returning son in parable from Luke 15.<sup>16</sup>

The drama of embrace interprets the parable Jesus told and succinctly describes God's act of reconciling the world through Jesus' life, death and resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). For Wolf, God's reconciling embrace stands at the centre of the New Testament and at the heart of distinctively Christian theology. The father's embrace of the prodigal expands to include God's reconciling embrace of humanity in Christ but also delves deeply into the enmities and hostility of daily experience.

The three example sermons that follow are:

- A Sunday sermon titled "We are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, so be reconciled" (2 Corinthians 5:20);
- A baptism address titled 'Open arms (Luke 15:11–32)';

- A funeral talk titled 'Talk for the funeral of Tyler Piper from Luke 15'.

## Endnotes

1. CK Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, 2009.
2. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, SCM, London, 1963, pp. 131, 138.
3. NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, SPCK, London, 1996, p. xiii.
4. NT Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1999, pp. 41–2, is surprised that no one else bothers to interpret the Prodigal son's leaving and returning as Israel's exile and restoration. A lesser scholar than Wright might perhaps be counselled to be less surprised and more cautious when other interpreters are not convinced by the proposal.
5. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 126.
6. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 131, claims that 'he is making a claim, a claim to be the one in and through whom Israel's god is restoring his people'. Wright also observes that 'the strange announcement of resurrection, twice within the parable (verses 24, 32), makes excellent sense in this context. Jesus' actions, and his words, themselves stand in need of vindication'.
7. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 130–131.
8. The parable's function as the 'gospel within the gospel' is exploited by many preachers such as Timothy J Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2008.
9. See Kenneth E Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976; Kenneth E Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15*, Concordia, St Louis, 1992 and Kenneth E Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, IVP, Downers Grove, 2008.
10. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, pp. 162–66, 181, where his observations that the prodigal's request for his share of the inheritance was akin to saying to the father 'you're as good as dead as far I'm concerned' and the father's utter disregard for his own reputation as he runs out to greet the returning son have become commonplace and a measure of Bailey's influence. For a recent

appropriation of Bailey's analysis of shame see Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008, pp. 125–26.

11. Christopher D Marshall, 'Offending, Restoration, and the Law-Abiding Community: Restorative Justice in the New Testament and in the New Zealand Experience', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, No. 27, 2007.
12. Eduard Schweizer, *Jesus, the Parable of God: What Do We Really Know About Jesus?*, Pickwick, Allison Park, 1994, p. 32.
13. Schweizer, *Jesus, the Parable of God*, p. 63, pp. 246–52.
14. Miroslav Volf, 'Introduction: A Queen and a Beggar: Challenges and Prospects of Theology', in Volf and others (eds), *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, pp. ix–xviii, who notes the all-too-common disjunction between the two.
15. Miroslav Volf, *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2010, p. 43, notes 'at the heart of every good theology lies not simply a plausible intellectual vision but more importantly a compelling account of a way of life, and that theology is therefore best done from within the pursuit of this way of life' (emphasis retained).
16. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, pp. 31, 126, 140. See also Miroslav Volf, 'A Vision of Embrace', *Ecumenical Review*, No. 47, 1995, p. 195.

# 'We are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, so be reconciled'

(2 Corinthians 5:20)

**Rebecca Newland**

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This sermon presupposes that those hearing it have already heard the readings for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C: Joshua 5:2–12, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16–21, Luke 15:11–32

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On Wednesday night the new parish council met for the first time since the AGM. Most of the people on the council had been on last year so although it was new it felt very familiar. I am delighted that Ian will continue as the chairperson, Shane will continue as the treasurer and Helen will take over

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the secretary's job. We also need to have a short meeting after the 10.00 am service to vote Ian formally to be the second churchwarden. I commend all our councillors for stepping up to the mark and being willing to serve the rest of us. Running a parish, facilitating its mission and ministry, is a complicated, taxing and at times frustrating job. I also intend that we will have fun and enjoy ourselves. I ask you all to pray regularly for our parish leadership – for Ian, Denise, Helen, Shane, Fred and Tim.

It will not come as a surprise to you and it certainly was no surprise to the parish council members that as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have some jobs to do. A good portion of our meeting on Wednesday night was taken up by deciding who was going to do what and allocating tasks. The work of parish council is twofold: to provide leadership and to support the rest of us in the jobs we need to do. Just think for a moment what those jobs might be ...

Now I am going to tell you something about the jobs we do here – the core, central, most important part of the things you do as part of the church: you are a minister of reconciliation. If you are sitting in this church, if you are a baptised Christian, if you have made it your business to accept the path Christ offers, then you are an ambassador for him, a minister of the reconciliation he embodied. This phrase is only mentioned in the reading from 2 Corinthians that we heard but it is a theme that runs through all the New Testament.

Paul in this letter was, as usual with that community, trying to help them with their divisions and conflicts. In the midst of their wrangling he always pointed them to Jesus Christ. He said that if you are in Christ, if I am in Christ, then the old has passed away and everything has become new. In this new person there is a new understanding, a new relationship with God, a new purpose and a new self. Paul affirms that all this is made possible through Christ who reconciled the world to God and has given his followers this ministry of reconciliation.

I looked up the dictionary to find what it had to say about reconciliation: it means the ending of a conflict, the making of two or more things consistent or compatible. It is the re-establishment of friendship or harmony. I also went back to the New Testament Greek – the word there is *καταλλάσσω* – and it means being put back into friendship with God, being made friends again. It seems such a simple thing doesn't it? 'Becoming friends again.'

The opposite of reconciliation is estrangement, alienation and conflict. An image that helps me picture this is of something that was once whole that is now fractured, split apart and broken. All of us know what estrangement feels and looks like. Perhaps we have experienced it in our families, marriages or partnerships. Perhaps we see it all too clearly in our society and nations. Perhaps we have knowledge of it in ourselves – our heart, body and head – feeling fractured, not working in harmony. In our culture today it is said that people are no longer concerned about the wrath of God but are acutely aware of the experience of God's absence. That you can see by the current demand for books on spirituality. In terms of our society it is indifference, facile tolerance and the absence of involvement that keep people apart. I sometimes wonder whether the age of the Internet and emails is really the age of ever more estrangement and alienation.

Reconciliation in our setting is about the drawing together of the parts that have become estranged, the healing of what was once whole, the making of friends – with ourselves, each other and the God of all – bringing all that together into peace, harmony and joy. Is this not the most wonderful of ministries? Is this not something to get excited about? Get excited members of parish council – this is great stuff! All your 'nitty gritty' decision making and consulting is about facilitating this one goal. Get excited the rest of you! This is what our life as Christians is all about: this reconciliation, the making of friends between all the parts that are estranged and divided. It is about wholeness and peace.

But first things first – we can only do this ministry, this service for the good of the whole world, if we are ourselves reconciled to God. We can only be in Christ, be the new creation, be equipped, strengthened and empowered for this task if we are back to being friends with God. Paul says, 'we entreat, we beg you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God' (2 Corinthians 5:20).

The parable of the prodigal son of course gives us the clearest picture about reconciliation and its process. What was once whole, the relationship between father and son, is fractured. In a place of poverty, estrangement and desperation the son comes to his senses and begins the journey home. The father rushes to meet him with outstretched arms, embraces him, kills the fatted calf and rejoices. The elder son sulks – but he is assured that everything the father has is his.

There are two parts, two pillars if you like to reconciliation. These pillars are essential. One is the pillar of love and mercy with eagerness and joy

thrown in. The other is the pillar of humility and repentance – the decision to turn away from the path that leads to more fragmentation and instead to head back to the place of wholeness.

Imagine these two pillars are the pillars of a bridge but the bridge is broken. God is on one side and you are on the other. Like the younger son in the parable you come to yourself, you come to your senses, and realise that you are living in a place where you are disconnected, estranged from your true being, your true home. The memory of God's love calls to you and awakens your soul – and you start to head home. God, in Christ, comes to meet you. He encourages you. He tells you that on the other side is the place of love and wholeness, the source of all peace and completion. He tells you his Father is abundantly forgiving and merciful, waiting to welcome you home. He lays down his life, across the divide, he stretches out his arms to guide you along the path, so that you can pass over and be united with God. The journey itself transforms you. The love encountered through Christ redeems you. You have died to yourself, your old way of being. You have encountered and been saved by Christ, and are renewed. And your joy and peace know no bounds. Your soul has come to rest in God. This is what Christ offers, each and every day for each moment of time and space.

*Then God taps you on the shoulder and says, 'right – get back out there – show other people the way home – you are my minister of reconciliation, you are my ambassador'. We are always a personal representative of Jesus Christ in every situation – not just in church on Sunday morning but in every situation.*

To finish, here are some hot tips on how to be a minister of reconciliation.

- If you feel estranged or distant from God then get reconciled. Make friends again. Find some time to reach out. Get Christ to take your hand again and get him to re-introduce you to the divine creator of all. Ask his Spirit to come and dwell in your heart. The Holy Communion we will shortly share is, amongst other things, about this reconnecting, this remembering, the bringing of the separated parts together again.
- Pray – from a place of humility and openness. Pray, talk to God, be at one with him. Every day pray. Pray for situations where there is fracturing and conflict. Pray for unity

and wholeness. In the end unity and wholeness are about being, not the imposition of an action either on others or on ourselves.

- Model humility, repentance, love and mercy. Be those pillars in your life and in the life of others around you.
- Find a way to bring wholeness to a situation – where there is anger bring patience, where there is stress bring calm, where there is despair bring hope – you get the picture. If you cannot get beyond your own frustration, fear or resentment then get some help. In any conflicted situation the answer can usually be found in your own heart.
- Support a cause that has as its focus reconciliation and wholeness. Serve that cause through your time and money.
- Tell others about God's love and joy. Tell them that wholeness and the healing of estrangement is possible. Give them hope. Tell them in word and deed but tell them from your perspective. Tell them your story. There is no right way to tell it. No one story is better than anyone else's. It is said that out lives are the last book of the Bible, we are the last revelation. Tell your story, your unique, important, never-to-be-repeated story.

Being a minister of reconciliation is a great honour – and what an extraordinary and wonderful purpose in life! Being an ambassador for Christ and the wholeness he brings is a task to be approached with humility and gratitude. Don't even begin to think you are not up to it – you are! You, like all Christians, are called to this ministry so I entreat you, I beg you, be reconciled to God and bring reconciliation to others.

# Open arms

## (Luke 15:11–32)

Sallyanne Hart

### Context

I prepared this sermon with a baptism in mind. In our parish, the baptismal party is often large and generally composed of people who would not normally consider going to church. Some of the older members of the party may have heard the story of the prodigal son before, but it will be new to the majority. Many will have brought with them misconceptions about what Christians believe, often regarding Christianity as a series of repressive moral precepts.

In this sermon I have attempted to meet with them on common ground. Because it is the ties and bonds of family that have brought them into this unfamiliar environment, I begin with ‘family’ stories and issues that may be relevant to families. I use a long and anecdotal introduction because I know that people will ‘switch off’ during the sermon if I don’t actively engage their attentions immediately. I attempt to avoid ‘religious’ language and I present one simple message. Because I know that most people who don’t attend church are unused to sitting listening for long periods, I keep it short. I try to subvert the expectation that preachers are only interested in condemning other people’s morals!

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## **Sermon**

Lots of us have tried running away when we were little kids. I remember setting off at the age of four, to make a new life for myself away from the tyranny of my parents; my mother was being totally unreasonable and wanted me to tidy my toys away, I seem to remember. I was fearless and determined but I made the mistake of taking my two-and-a-half year-old twin cousins along with me. After a couple of blocks of brisk walking, they began to whinge and suggest that they might like to be reunited with their mother. I tried to keep them moving, but they wanted to sit down and rest. That's little kids for you, I thought. Finally, just when I had total mutiny on my hands, my father arrived in the car and took us home.

I was visiting a friend once when her pre-schooler got angry about something and announced that he was leaving home. He marched off to his bedroom and packed his favourite toys into a backpack. Then he walked past us and out the front door. We watched through the window and saw him go as far as the front gate where he stopped. His backpack was heavy and it was beginning to get dark outside. He stood at the gate for a minute, then he came back and knocked on the front door. When his mother opened it he said, with great dignity, 'Would you mind giving me a lift?'

Every family seems to have a story about someone who ran away when little. These stories become part of our family history, to be laughed about at family gatherings. Like, 'Remember the time Bill ran away but had to come home because he needed to go to the toilet?' And Bill, who's fifty-six now, laughs along with everyone else at the memory.

But when the child who wants to leave home is an adolescent, the matter becomes much more serious. The issue of young people who run away from home is a big problem in Australia. Every eighteen minutes someone is reported as missing in this country, making a total of 35,000 people per year. Of these, around 20,000 are under the age of eighteen. A few are kidnapped but the great majority of them are kids who have run away from home. They leave for a variety of reasons. Some go because of conflict with other family members. Some go in search of a good time, or of independence, or of opportunities to use drugs and alcohol, and to be with a partner or peer group. And some leave because they are experiencing abuse of some sort at home.

They leave behind them sadness and despair. People who research these things tell us that for every person who goes missing, approximately

twelve people are deeply affected: family members, friends, schoolmates. The slogan for National Missing Person's Week a couple of years ago was, 'Not knowing is like living in darkness'.

We tend to think of young run-aways as being a product of the times we live in, when bonds of family can be eroded by all kinds of things and where the generation gap is supposed to be getting wider and wider. This sort of thing didn't happen in the good old days, we hear, when families were close and kids knew how lucky they were. The story that we heard today from Luke's Gospel, about the son who leaves home, gives the lie to that. Even two thousand years ago kids got fed up with the discipline of parents, with doing the chores at home, and ran away to find the good life in the big city.

In today's reading, the religious leaders are angry about the kind of people Jesus has chosen to hang out with. The chapter begins with this:

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

Perhaps they feel that if Jesus is really the Son of God, he'd want to spend all his time among 'good' people, like them. But he has been seen on a number of occasions eating with sinners. He has been accused of being 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'.

Jesus's response is to tell them three stories that sum up his ministry and show what God is like. These stories are Jesus' reply to the religious leaders and their criticisms about who he chooses to befriend. He tells the story of a farmer who loses a sheep and leaves all the rest of the flock and searches until he finds it. The next story is very similar: a woman with ten silver coins loses one and searches the house until she finds it. At the end of both stories, Jesus makes the surprising observation that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one person who turns back to God, than over ninety-nine who have never left him.

Then Jesus tells a longer story.

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.'

This kid can't wait for his father to die, so that he can get his hands on his inheritance. I imagine that the father may be hurt, but he doesn't complain.

The boy gets his inheritance and a couple of days later he sets off for the bright lights in another country where, we're told, he squandered his money on dissolute living.

It sounds familiar, doesn't it? The country kid who can't wait to leave the farm and head off to the bright lights of the city. He's got a lot of money, but he's not interested in spending it wisely. He doesn't get into the property market, or invest what he has. He certainly doesn't try to get a job. He has a better plan. He parties. He drinks too much. He sleeps around. He gets in with a bad crowd. It all sounds depressingly familiar. And when all his money is gone, a severe famine hits the area and he begins to be in need. So ironically, the boy who left the country for the good life in the city ends up on a farm, where he works as a labourer. Because he's desperate, he takes the job no one else wants to do. He looks after the pigs.

Now one pig on its own is a charming creature, but there's no denying that when you get a number of them together, they smell. I once stayed at a conference centre that was situated a couple of miles from a piggery. The first night, when we arrived, we didn't notice a thing. But the next morning, the wind changed direction and the smell was so bad we seriously considered packing up and heading home. We were a few miles away, so I hate to think what it smelt like close up! And on top of the smell factor, Jews regard pigs as unclean animals and have nothing to do with them. To care for a herd of pigs would be the most degrading profession for a Jew. Not only that, but the boy isn't earning enough to feed himself in this famine-stricken land. The story says, 'He would gladly have eaten the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything.'

He gets to thinking about the good old days, when he lived at home with his family. He says to himself, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am, dying of hunger.' And at last, he comes to his senses. He will go home and try to get a job labouring on his father's land.

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 gets up and goes home. And the story goes on, '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.' Once a father, always a father. Then the son said to him, 'Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be your son.' But he doesn't get to finish his prepared speech, doesn't get to the part about being taken on as a hired hand. The father is already going into celebration mode. He calls to his servants,

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 fattened 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 begin to party.

Then the elder son arrives home from working in the fields and he hears the sound of music and dancing. He asks one of the servants what is going on and is told that his brother has come home and that his father is holding a party to celebrate. He gets really angry and refuses to come into the house. So his father goes out to him and pleads with him to come in. The elder son replies,

Listen! For all these years I have worked like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed you. But you've 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!

He's understandably full of hurt and bitterness. His father answers him with great love and tenderness.

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.

Don't you love a happy ending?

I'm sure you've guessed who the people in the story are thought to represent, because it's pretty obvious. The loving father is God, the younger son is the person who turns away from God and decides to live without him. And the elder son is the person who has always loved God and hasn't

turned away at all. Which of these people do you resemble? Where are you in this story?

It is interesting to note that the father doesn't try to stop the son from leaving; he lets him make his own choice, for better or for worse. And although he might want to, he doesn't send people after his son to bring him back. He knows that the only one who can make the decision to return is the boy himself. God does not force us to live in relationship with him. But when we decide to go back to him, he meets us with open arms on the road.

The elder brother is the saddest person in the whole story, to my mind. We never hear his response to his father's words. Did he hug him and go into the house to join in the party? Or did he choose to stay outside, a prey to bitterness and anger? Down through the years there have been many people in the church who haven't wanted to see God's love and forgiveness offered to 'sinners'. They are a bit like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, who didn't want Jesus to eat with 'the wrong sort of people'. They are missing so much. Listen to what the father, God, says to them: 'Children, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.' Coming from the God of the universe, that's a pretty big statement.

When I was young, I used to think that there was an error in the logic of this story. I used to think that if the son had been away for months and months – after all, it sounds as if he had a fair bit of money to run through – then it was a bit of a coincidence that his father just happened to look out and see him on the very day he came home. Then I had a child of my own and it all began to make sense. The father didn't just happen to see his son. He saw him because he went out to look up the road for him day after day. When he was working on the farm, he'd keep looking off toward the front gate. Whenever he went back in to the house, he'd stop by the door and have one last long look. When he got up in the morning, he'd check out the window; before he went to bed, he'd spend ten minutes looking out. Because he loved his son, he never gave up wishing and hoping that he'd come back.

And this same loving father is waiting for every one of us. He never stops hoping that, one day, we will come home to him. Have you called home lately, to spend time with your father?

This is no ordinary day. Today we welcome Tameeka and Elliott-Cooper and all their families and friends. In a few minutes, we will be baptising these babies and welcoming them into God's family. We pray that they will grow up knowing that as well as the loving families who have come to support

them today, they belong to another family, headed by a loving father who will never give up on them. No matter how they may choose to live their lives, he will always be prepared to meet them with open arms when they turn to him.

# Talk for the funeral of Tyler Piper from Luke 15

**Andrew Taylor**

## **Context**

I have prepared a funeral talk based on Luke 15 for a fictional person, with the following considerations in mind:

- I have never met him.
- The family are there primarily to mourn their loved one, not to attend a church service.
- I need to share the hope that Jesus offers and the love God has.
- I need to be respectful and pastorally sensitive to the captive congregation.
- The talk is intentionally short, hoping to plant the Gospel seed.
- I am assuming Christian/Church illiteracy and probably misconceptions.
- I will pray that God's Spirit will open the hearts of the congregation.

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## Sermon

One of the hardest things about death and the loss of a loved one is the broken relationship.

We have heard what sort of a bloke Tyler was. He was a straight talker with a sense of humour. He cared for his family and for his friends. He enjoyed telling yarns and making people laugh. He was generous, he was gifted with his hands, he loved to go fishing and he loved playing golf. He was a hard working man. And from my discussions with the family, I discovered that he really loved his food (especially lamingtons and steamed pudding).

We feel the loss of this broken relationship even more because we don't get to hear his jokes, go fishing or enjoy a great meal with him.

Death can make us stop and think about what's really important in life. Most important in life is achieving what we are made for. We are made for relationships: relationship with people, relationship with our friends, relationship with our family, relationship with our workmates and relationship with God.

In our reading today we heard three stories that reflect the pain of loss. First we heard the story of a lost sheep, then the loss of a precious coin and then the loss of a son. This story is known by some as the story of the prodigal son. When Jesus spoke these words, he demonstrated his understanding of the pain that comes with loss. He understands the pain that comes through a broken relationship. He understands the sadness many of you feel today.

As well as the feelings of sadness and loss you are currently experiencing, today you will take time to remember the good times you had with Tyler. You will take time to celebrate his life and the relationships you had with him.

We show love in a number of ways. Tyler showed love in the care and generosity he gave to many of you. God demonstrates his love for us by sending his son to die for us, so that our relationships with him can be restored.

In our passage there is great rejoicing when the lost sheep and the lost coin are found. There is great rejoicing when the broken relationship with the lost son is restored. We are made for relationship with people and for relationship with God.

I didn't ever get to meet or to know Tyler in person. Meeting some of the family has helped me to understand in part what he was like. I didn't ever get to talk with Tyler about where he stood with God.

But I do know that God understands the pain of loss. I do know that God understands the pain of broken relationship. I do know that God went

to extraordinary lengths to repair and heal his relationship with us. I do know that I trust Jesus when he tells this story of the lost son and shares his understanding of the pain of broken relationship but also the hope of restored relationship with God.

I don't know how you are feeling right now. I suspect you have a mixture of emotions. We all process the grief and loss of a loved one in different ways. That's normal and that's okay. I want to encourage you to take time today to share stories about Tyler. Celebrate the good times you had with him.

One of the most common things families say at funerals is, 'we should get together more often' I encourage you to value and appreciate the relationships you have with your friends and family. Maybe there are things you have left unsaid that need to be said. Or maybe there is someone you need to forgive. Or maybe there is healing you need to have. Whatever it is, don't waste time; act. Relationships are important.

And finally at this difficult time, I want to encourage you to call on God for strength and support and comfort and hope. He does listen, he does hear and he does love you.

Let me pray ...