

16 September 2007

A Sting in the Tale

Reading: Luke 15:1-2, 11-31

Have you had any dinner guests lately? If so, you probably invited them because they are already your friends or because you are intentionally extending a hand of friendship to them. No matter what happened to disrupt the preparation of the meal, you received them enthusiastically and made them feel that they were doing you a favour by accepting the invitation.

Today it is safe to assume that a host and his or her guests are on good terms. But in Jesus' day, this was even more the case. When the guests arrived it was customary for the host to shower them with a long series of compliments to which they were expected to respond. To have "table fellowship" with someone indicated that you accepted them. That's why first century Jews were very particular about their dinner guests.

And here was Jesus eating with "tax collectors and sinners." No self-respecting rabbi would dream of doing that. You see, *these people were bad, very bad!* They had money all right, but I suppose you could call it "tainted money." Their wealth meant that they could indulge their passions without restraint. They were notorious for their loose morals. Often when tax collectors are mentioned, their companions are described as "sinners" (Matt 9:10-11). Jesus, himself, mentioned heathen and prostitutes in the same breath as tax collectors (Matt. 18:17; 21:31). What made them particularly reprehensible was the fact that they hired themselves out to the occupying Romans. Worse still, from their position of advantage, they often exploited their less-educated compatriots.

It appears that Jesus not only accepted their hospitality but actually extended hospitality to them.¹ You can imagine the expressions on the faces of the Pharisees and teachers of the law as they muttered away? This is scandalous! These people may be rich, but from a religious and moral point of view, they are society's sewer. Anyone with the slightest respect for God would give them a wide berth. To eat with them--that's disgusting! (Sadly, we sometimes encounter similar attitudes among Christians).

Their disapproving mutters called for a response. And what a response Jesus gave them.

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined Ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976 and 1980), 143.

I. IF YOU FEEL THAT YOU ARE A HOPELESS CASE, THIS HAS TO BE THE BEST NEWS YOU HAVE EVER HEARD.

But no matter where we find ourselves, this trio of parables should thrill us. We shall simply take a quick glance at the first two stories in this trilogy and then concentrate on the third.

A. The Lost Sheep

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.” No sheep was expendable. The shepherd would make sure the ninety-nine were safe and go in search of the lost sheep. What makes this little parable especially appropriate is the emphasis Jesus places on the demeanour of the shepherd. He is so delighted to have found his sheep that he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Once he arrives, he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” The Lord’s comment leaves us in no doubt that he is speaking about the recovery of a lost *person*: “I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (15:7).²

Gunther Bornkamm draws attention to “the deep gloom that hangs over the righteousness of ‘the good.’”³ Outwardly, their conduct conformed to the letter of the law. But they could be miserable! By stark contrast, the spontaneous joy of the shepherd reflects the rejoicing in heaven over a repentant sinner. So, *there is joy!*

B. The Lost Coin

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one.” I don’t know about you, but I can’t rest when I am looking for something I have mislaid. At times I have to say to myself, “Forget it; it will eventually turn up. You are now wasting time.” But a silver coin was worth a whole day’s wages and the woman turned the place upside down until she found her lost coin. The coin was no more valuable than the other nine. But *its lostness invested it with special value.*

Again there is *this emphatic note of joy.* She calls her friends and neighbours together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin. Jesus concludes the parable with the same observation: “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (10). The contrast between the misery of legalistic religion and the joy of true relationship is again evident.

² We should not make Jesus’ statement into a theological declaration that there are some (many) who do not need to repent. He is commenting on the one who does repent. His attitude on the general need for repentance is evident in the “sting in the tale” of the third parable.

³ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 85.

So, one sheep out of *a hundred* was lost, and one coin out of *ten* was lost. An *unintelligent animal* and an *inanimate object*! The tension mounts:

C. The Lost Son

There was a man who had *two* sons. The younger of the two was bad, *very* bad!

He approached his father with an improper request: “Give me my share of the inheritance.”

1. *More than a slap in the face*

To us, this may appear a little forward. In that day and in that land, this kind of action was unheard of. There would have been a gasp of disbelief in the crowd. Such a request constituted an extraordinary insult. It was tantamount to a death wish. It was like saying: “I cannot wait for you to die!” Kenneth Bailey informs us that “in the Middle Eastern milieu the father is expected to explode and discipline the boy for the cruel implications of his demand”⁴ Such behaviour could even lead to a “cutting off” ceremony in which the boy was formally disowned and declared dead. When he “got together all he had and set off for a distant country,” he took his rebellion one step further. Even if there is a premature division of the estate, the father’s rights over the property are inviolable for as long as he lives. By taking off as he did, the son was depriving his father of a significant portion of the goods to which he was entitled for as long as he lived!

2. *In “the distant country”*

The prodigal son gradually descends into his own hell. He lands up in “a distant country.” This is more than a geographical reference. He has chosen to go to a *Gentile* land. The man is a spendthrift and he squanders his wealth by “living it up.”

With his resources gone, it is possible that he could have eked out a living. Often that happens. The “good life” is not all it is cracked up to be, but pride prevents one from acknowledging that. So we continue in an unsatisfactory state. But, unfortunately, in this case there was a severe famine in the whole country. We have to ask whether the famine was unfortunate or fortuitous, or perhaps providential.

In his desperate need, he hired himself out to a citizen of that land. Remember, one of the really shameful things about the tax collectors was that they had hired themselves out to Gentiles in order to make money. Things are going from bad to worse. Just how low can you go? His new master sent him out into the field to feed pigs. If the

⁴ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 165.

crowds were gasping to start with, now they are horrified. You know what Jews thought of pigs! Gasps gave way to expressions of disgust!

Believe it or not, it gets worse still: “He longed to fill his stomach with the pods the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything” (15:16).

3. *He comes “to his senses.”*

There, languishing in the field with the smelly pigs, penniless and hungry, he came to his senses. Suddenly he saw. “How many of my fathers hired men have food to spare and here I am starving to death?” Things had been going from bad to worse for a long time, but only when he hit rock bottom did his eyes open to his pitiful condition.

Of course, we could argue that the selfish so-and-so did not have a change of heart. Now that he is flat broke, he might as well go home. Anything is better than his present misery. But that’s not how Jesus’ original hearers would have heard the parable. The impression is certainly that he did have a change of heart. He resolved, “I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men” (18, 19).

Before him lay a long journey. For all he knew, he had been formally disowned. The best he could hope for was that he might be allowed to work on the estate of which he had once been an heir. Not only would he experience humiliation, he would also face the scorn of the whole village. When a man did what he had done, he offended the entire community.

4. *Reception and reinstatement*

The hearers are hanging on Jesus’ words. Just what sort of reception could this ‘ne’re do well’ expect? Don’t forget, we know how the story turned out. The original hearers did not. They were in for an even greater surprise. Every word is carefully chosen.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (15:20). Kenneth Bailey reminds us that “an oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere. To do so is humiliating.”⁵

He threw his arms around his emaciated son and kissed him repeatedly. The apology has burned itself into the boy’s heart and it pours from him: “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (21). But the father said to the servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe (this was no doubt

⁵ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 181.

the robe the father would have worn on festal occasions) and put it on him. And put a ring on his finger (a signet ring indicating that he is restored to a position of trust) and sandals on his feet (a sign of his being a free man in the house, not a servant).” What’s more, “Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate!” This was a party at which most, if not all, the village would be present.

The overjoyed father gives the reason for it all: “This son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.

Oh, and did you notice that the son never got to recite the final sentence of his speech of repentance? He was right: he *had* sinned. He was right: he was no longer *worthy* to be called a son. But after the father had embraced him, it would have been inappropriate to say, “Make me as one of your hired servants.”

II. IF YOU ARE IN “A GOOD WAY” RELIGIOUSLY, THIS PARABLE MAY WELL HAVE A SOBERING WORD TO SAY TO YOU.

But no matter where we find ourselves, it provides us with a picture of what religion can do to us. If it does not centre in a warm relationship, our religion can make us miserable and censorious. It can lead to alienation from our father, every bit as much as outward rebellion and wild living.

A. The Other Lost Son

If the parable could have ended on this moving note of reconciliation, it would still have contained a significant development on the first two parables. There is spontaneous joy when *something* lost is found. How much more when a son, who was as good as dead, returns home! But the parable has a telling sting in the tale (sic).⁶

The older brother is in the field. Dutiful and diligent as ever, he hears the music and the dancing. Instead of going in to find out for himself, he calls one of the servants and asks what is going on. That already tells us something about him. The servant gives him the great news: “Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”

Instead of joy that his wayward brother has returned, he becomes angry and refuses to go in. Oh, the “deep gloom that hangs over the righteousness of the good!” So his father, as generous towards this misery-of-a-man as he was towards his delinquent son, goes out to him.

⁶ This is the title of an excellent little book on the parables: Roy Clements, *Sting in the Tale* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1995).

Listen to him whine: “Look, *all these years* (who’s counting?) I’ve been *slaving* (‘slaving’ on the *family* estate!) for you and *never disobeyed* your orders. You never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with *my friends* (it’s amazing that he had any). But when this *son of yours* (you may not have disowned him as a son but I have disowned him as a brother) who has squandered your property *with prostitutes* (he assumes the worst) comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

How tragic! Here is a son with the mentality of a slave! On the outside he keeps his father’s rules. But inside he is out of synch with his father’s heart! He has not the slightest concern for *his father’s* happiness. He is not in a distant country, but he is as far from his father’s heart as his younger brother had ever been.

What an eloquent exposé of the muttering Pharisees who looked on begrudgingly at the tax collectors. But, sadly, it’s not unheard of among Christians today. We ourselves are recipients of grace. Nothing should give us greater joy than to see the most despicable characters come to Christ. But there’s more. Even *before* they come to salvation, we should love them and welcome them. We should be characterised by the same generosity that Jesus showed.

B. Back to the Main Focus

The note on which the parable ends brings us right back to its main focus. Instead of summoning his older son, he goes out to him. We hear the father gently chide his resentful boy: “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

Yes, it has a sting in the tale, but the younger son still stands at the centre of the story. It is legitimate to call it the parable of the prodigal son. But perhaps it would be even more fitting to call it, “**The Parable of the Gracious Father.**”

1. A Buddhist parable

We do not run down other religions in this church. There is a Buddhist parable of “a prodigal son.” I shall briefly recount it, not to criticize the Buddhist version but to accentuate the amazing revelation of grace in the Lord’s parable.

In the *Lotus of Perfect Law*, a son left home and spent many years away from his father in a distant land. Meanwhile the father accumulated vast riches. Finally, while looking for food and clothing, the son happened to come across the country in which his father was living. His father saw him in rags and in misery, and ordered some of his servants to call him.

When the son saw the place to which he was conducted, he thought, “I must have evoked the suspicion of a powerful man, and he will throw me into prison.” Full of apprehension he made his escape before he had seen his father. Then the father sent messengers out after his son who was caught and brought back despite his protest. Still not revealing his identity, the father waited to see whether the young man would become worthy to be a son. He appointed a labourer to assign him humble tasks on the estate and to lead him on through encouragement.

From the window of his palace the father watched the boy. As he proved that he was honest and industrious, he was gradually promoted. When he had withstood temptation and broken himself of a mean spirit the father revealed his identity and formally declared him to be his heir. Understandably this filled the son with great joy.

The moral of the story: “Little by little must the minds of men be trained for higher truths.”⁷ The father did not accept his son while he was still unworthy. He waited for him to develop a better human nature step by step, giving him some humble and suitable work to help him to reform.

2. *Amazing grace*

How very different is the grace of God! Here is a father who never forgets. His eyes scan the horizon. He sees his bedraggled son a long way off. He runs. He embraces. He reinstates. He celebrates. To the first audience, such behaviour would have been unbelievable. God’s grace *is* amazing! In fact, the moment grace ceases to be amazing, it ceases to be grace.

Conclusion

Perhaps, metaphorically, you are in a distant country. You are not far off geographically or even morally. But spiritually! And you wonder if you can come. Well, Jesus answered that question decisively. There is one proviso. Come, just as you are!

⁷ Paul Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha* (Oxford: Oneworld Publishers, 1994), 182.