

27 March – 2 April 2022 Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Outrageous love

Read the passage from Luke. It is written below.

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 fatted 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 fatted 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.”

Bible notes

The younger son lived wastefully and shamefully, the elder son lived narrowly and resentfully – whatever is this generous father going to do with his two sons? The surprising (even shocking) answer seems to be: let them be who they are, and love them whatever they do. The younger son dishonours his father with the very suggestion of wanting to live a wild life, but his father allows it. Then he returns, ready with a rehearsed speech (even the hired hands do not go hungry). He is facing up to the reality of his situation, but he could still be viewed as looking out for number one. In an eastern culture with a stress on family duty and honour, the idea that such a disgraced and disgraceful son could return to the family on any terms would be anathema. In fact, it would be the duty of the father to banish him with a solemn curse. But what does this father do? He waits, watching for his son's return. He runs to him, something that is beneath the dignity of a patriarch. He does not wait to hear the whole prepared speech, but dresses his son in luxury and orders a celebration feast. The elder son cannot stomach this generous forgiveness, neither could the scribes and Pharisees listening to the parable. Often, nor can we. Yet it is one thing to discover that God forgives and is willing to wipe out a downward scale of sins; it is quite another to discover that God also does not operate an upwards scale of merit, where we might gain extra recognition for our good behaviour. The father has only two categories – dead or alive; lost or found – and his concern for both sons is only to love them and see them alive and found. We do not know if the elder son went in to the feast. Will we?

Reflection

Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.

The picture of God that emerges within this week's parable is completely at odds with a remote authoritarian figure who would condemn the behaviour of others, or control them through authority, power and fear. This father doesn't condemn, he allows – he allows rebellion and he allows resentment. In fact, he is vulnerable to rejection by both his sons, because he does not control them. He loves and he waits, he never gives up hope, he runs and embraces, he feasts and celebrates. He remains true to his values and so experiences both great sadness and great joy. Can we cope with this picture of God? If not, why not?

Questions for reflection

You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues of sharing.



Questions

- How do you imagine the loving and open arms of God?
- What does 'outrageous love' mean to you?
- What could you do as an expression of outrageous love?

Prayer

Adapt to your local context.

A prayer of praise

God of our families and our friends,
we praise you for those have inspired us,
for those who have mothered us,
for those who have been patient with us,
for those who have nurtured our faith
and shown us your love.

Amen.

A prayer to end the Bible study

God of outrageous love!
Thank you that we cannot fall out of your love,
no matter what our mistakes,
no matter how mean and grudging our love is.
As you welcome us with ever open arms,
enlarge our hearts and minds,
to serve faithfully and to love outrageously!

Amen.