

Welcome Home?

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. You never even gave me a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends.’”

A few weeks ago, before we got into Advent, I shared with you something of the seminar I had attended which was led by Michael Harvey the instigator of *Back to Church Sunday*. We saw something of the way that when congregations have really taken on board the principles of inviting people and putting them into practice that they have seen results. There is a great spiritual hunger throughout the nation, but all too often we are too timid, too unsure of ourselves, too uncertain to step out in faith and to take initiatives.

I mentioned that Michael Harvey is very much aware how difficult many people do find it, and freely admits that he finds it far easier to give a motivational talk encouraging others than to actually put it into practice himself. However, there is such an amazing opportunity available, and our difficulties can be overcome when we adopt a biblical mindset. When we understand it in terms of partnering with what God is already doing rather than seeing it as something that we need to be doing in our own strength, when we grasp that God equips us to do what he calls us to do, then it becomes possible. When we are motivated by the love of God it is no longer a burden, but a joy to reach out to others with the gospel.

Michael Harvey puts a strong emphasis on creating a welcoming environment in our churches. He writes:

What does welcome actually look like? Would you invite someone to your home, speak to them for an hour, and then offer them coffee on the way out? I am not suggesting that we need coffee before the service (though strong caffeine would keep more of us awake), but it’s a good idea to try to understand what welcome might look like if we started with a blank sheet of paper. I got into big trouble once by introducing an idea called “Doughnut Sunday” at the church I attend. Every fifth Sunday I went and brought trays of doughnuts; we announced this and people started bringing their friends, particularly children. All was going well until some of the jam from the doughnuts escaped and made a break for freedom on the church carpet, and before anyone could send for a senior church leader to resolve the matter, one of the ladies of the church became stuck to the jammy patch. We managed to avoid having to call out the emergency services, but as you can imagine, hasty discussions were had and Doughnut Sunday became no more!

He continues:

We need to have courage and innovate when it comes to welcome. It is a fantastic opportunity to offer hospitality. Remember how, after a long night fishing, the disciples came back to find Jesus cooking fish on the beach? They were overjoyed to see him. This demonstrates the power of hospitality and the

powerful role good food can play in welcome.

I would absolutely agree with him that we need to have courage and innovate if we are to see the church move forward. That is of particular relevance to us as a congregation as Presbytery are currently considering what future readjustment needs to take place to best use our limited resources to face the challenges of the future. We have so much potential, but we seem to be too timid to move forward and unlock it.

However, it does seem to me that we can only do that effectively when we have God's burden for the lost, when we have a desire to see men and women, boys and girls transformed by the love of God. I find Michael Harvey's story about the doughnuts very sad. What's more important to the folk in that congregation, keeping their carpet clean or the eternal destiny of people who are without hope and without God in the world? That story saddens me, but it doesn't surprise me. How often do we put our personal preferences, our desire to keep things done in an orderly fashion, our need to keep within our own comfort zone, before the Kingdom of God?

The attitude shown by those who brought an end to "Doughnut Sunday" reminds me very much of that of the older brother in the story that we read from Luke's gospel this morning. It illustrates the very opposite of the message that I want to get across, but I think it serves as an instructive warning to each of us. We can so easily slip into wrong attitudes which are harmful both at a personal level and for the church. We can learn from the mistakes of the older brother and avoid falling into the traps that ensnared him. If we have already followed his path, then it's not too late to turn round and come back to God.

I'm sure we are all familiar with the story of the lost son. I deliberately didn't read what we would probably see as the main narrative even it is one of the most powerful demonstrations of the heart of God. I think sometimes we can see verses 25 onward as a wee appendage that is not really part of the main story. That's why I included verses 1 and 2 which set the context. This story has a sting in the tail which we can so easily miss.

I've been considering this story in my daily notes so I'm grateful to Jeff Lucas whose thoughts I am drawing on extensively. We see that this parable, along with the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin are Jesus' response to a specific group of people who were constantly critical of his methods which included hanging out with the "wrong" kind of people. There were several thousand Pharisees in Israel in Jesus' day. They longed for political freedom of Israel and to see the nation purged of paganism. We tend to view them as the bad guys, but actually they were very committed to moral principles and were highly respected. There was much to be admired about them, but they also had their blind spots.

Jesus might have been using a play on words when he talked about the *elder* brother. The Greek word used in the New Testament reflects the Aramaic, and is the word *presbuteros* meaning *elder*, which was used to describe the "elders" of the people, especially the scribes and Pharisees. Jeff Lucas comments. "We can all become like the elder brother. When religion means that we are carping, superior, legalistic, or self-righteous, we become

the ones that Jesus is addressing in this story.”

On the surface the Pharisees looked like piously dedicated guardians of orthodoxy. They prayed for three hours a day, longed for a revival in Israel and had high hopes for a Messianic figure to rescue the nation. When we first meet the elder brother, we hear he had been working hard in the field. He was conscientious, maybe even working late. He was passionate about the farm, but despite all that he was no more in a right relationship with his father than his rebellious brother.

We might even have a certain amount of sympathy for the elder brother, but our very different cultural expectations can get in the way of our understanding of the story. When Jesus talked about an elder brother who refused to participate in a community feast his hearers would have been very shocked, because there was a cultural expectation that the elder brother would act as host at any family gathering. Jeff Lucas tells the story that they would have expected:

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ The older son, knowing that it was his responsibility to intervene and mediate in this developing conflict, came between his younger brother and his beloved father, and did everything in his power to reconcile them. A peace was brokered. They all lived happily ever after. And great was the relief of the fattened calf.”

In a family dispute like this, it would always be the responsibility of the oldest son in the family to step in. So according to the culture of the day, the elder brother had failed on two fronts, both as a host and as a mediator. Even if he hated his brother he should have still fulfilled the task for the sake of his father, but here the elder son refuses. The criticism levelled at Jesus implicates the scribes and the Pharisees as playing the same role: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

People around us need to be reconciled to God and welcomed into our family. What is our attitude to them? Are we resentful? Are we indifferent? Do we share God’s longing that they should be saved? Do our hearts go out to the lost?

Again Jeff Lucas provides insight into what determines our attitude. He writes:

Ponder this: as Christians we can either live like slaves, or as sons and daughters of God. Over the years I’ve met thousands of Christians, and I’ve encountered far too many who live fearful, cringing lives. They are never quite at peace, never fully confident that the Lord absolutely loves them as they are. Very often these people work very hard as volunteers in their local churches and beyond. They are pillars and nobody can doubt their hard work, but sadly for some it is driven by the endless need to do more. Instead of being motivated by the wonderful secure love of God, they are compelled to work harder, always trying to gain God’s approval, never settled in the truth that he already utterly loves and approves of them.

That kind of compulsion can ultimately lead to resentment. The elder brother’s

angry outburst shows that he resented his father when he complains: "you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends..."

But it can also lead to self-deception, because the elder brother protests that he has never once disobeyed his father's orders, even while he stubbornly refuses to join the party...

Even though this character is clearly pointing out the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus purpose is not to humiliate them but to challenge them, to help them to see their self-deception, and encourage them to be reconciled with God. In the parable the father does everything he can to join the party. There's an interesting contrast in the wording that we can easily miss because we read the story in English. When the elder brother summons the servant and demands to know the reason for the spontaneous party, the word means "to stand in front of": a posture of interrogation. But the word used for the conversation between the father is different, it means "to come alongside" and is associated with bringing comfort or help.

I find that challenging. I've heard far too many conversations in the church where the tone is one of confrontation rather than comfort. I want my conversations to be filled with grace like the father rather than conflict like his son. I know don't always succeed, but that's my aim, and it needs to be the intention of each one of us.

The parable is open ended. We are not told how the older brother responded. We don't know whether his father helped him to see sense or whether he continued with his strop. That's deliberate because he was leaving it open to the scribes and Pharisees to decide how they wanted to finish the story. They could continue in their self-righteous condemnation of Jesus for sharing God's love with the undeserving, or they could join the party.

The story is open ended for us too. Maybe some of us need to re-evaluate our attitudes big time. Maybe for some it is just a warning to be on our guard. I know that if I am not careful I can so easily slip into Pharisee mode. May we take the older brother as a role model of what we should avoid. May our hearts be filled with a desire to welcome people into the Kingdom of God.