

**Teaching of Jesus: The Joy of God - who is the
Kingdom for?**

Nelson Cathedral

20/3/2025

OT: Joshua 5:9-12

NT: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Gospel: Luke 15:1-24

Introduction.

When our Children were 9 and 11, we took them on a trip to Europe and the UK and spent a week in Italy. Just outside Venice we stayed in a town called Traviso, and one night Lee-ann went and ordered Pizza from the local shop. As the story goes, she tried to decipher the menu board by asking, “is that one cow...moo, that one pork...oink oink, that one chicken cluck, cluck (and I wont worry about the actions).

When we are in a foreign place and culture it is very easy for communication to get lost in translation. That is also true when we read the Bible, and especially the parables of Jesus that use the imagery, language and understanding of Jewish culture, some 2000 years ago.

Last week we talked about the theme the Kingdom of God and saw how God’s kingdom is open to everyone. I have mentioned before how there have been occasions when people have said to me, “I won’t come into the Cathedral because God would zap me” to make the point that only good or respectable people are allowed in. But is that what we see in the ministry of Jesus, is there some criteria that defines what Jesus meant by “all are welcome”?

The context for this parable can be found at the beginning of chapter 15, where the Pharisees, the religious leaders, were grumbling against Jesus because of the practice of “Table fellowship”. Culturally

to share a meal with someone means to share your life with them, to accept them. Jesus was eating with those identified as “sinners”, and what’s more, they were his invited guests. Jesus in hosting a meal was expressing the redeeming love of God by including them in the community of salvation. But the Pharisees believed they were the faithful, chosen ones.

The Father and Two Sons.

Today’s parable is often called the “prodigal son” but the real focus is the “forgiving father”, so let’s see how each of the three characters respond to the situation.

Younger Son.

First, we start with the younger son who represents a sinner who repents, but who begins this story with an unparalleled and shame-filled insult to his Father.

As Kenneth Bailey in his cultural analysis of the New Testament explains, this is the only story of its type in Middle Eastern literature past and present. In asking

people in the Middle East about this parable he says the response is always the same:

- “Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?”
- “Never”
- “Could anyone ever make such a request?”
- “Impossible”
- “If anyone ever did, what would happen?”
- “His father would beat him of course”
- “Why?”
- “This request means he wants his father to die.”

In asking for his inheritance while the father was still living, the younger son was actually wishing for the father’s death. More than this, he is asking for the right to sell his portion of land which is an offense not only to the father but also the wider community because property, especially land, was a family asset.

The phrase “**a few days later**” indicates that the son had gone around the locals trying to sell his land to the community’s disgust. So the son had both rejected his father and his wider community.

After squandering his money and accepting the most dishonourable of jobs, the younger son planned to return home to be a hired hand of his father – a position that would still provide social status and independence. It is possible he sees his failure in terms of financial loss, but his return rests solely on his father’s mercy and there is no expectation of anything more than a hired hand, a slave.

Older Son.

Next, we have the oldest son who represents the Pharisees – those who see themselves as inside the Kingdom of God.

Normally in the case of such a situation between the father and youngest son, the eldest son would have the role of reconciler - but he is silent, refusing to fulfill his duty or even to acknowledge he has a brother.

He has also benefited from his younger brother’s request because the father has already divided his property between the two sons – all the father had is his. Yet he perceives his position as one of a slave - he is estranged and rebellious while in the house.

All this indicates that his relationship with the father is strained because he is treating his father as a “task-master” not a loving father and so his response is also one of disrespect:

- He refuses to enter the celebration thrown by his father as an act of public defiance.

- He publicly argues with his father and neglects to address his father by his title, which would be considered an act of deep public insult.
- He also exaggerates the younger brother's situation making the situation worse.
- He is not acting as the honoured eldest son.

Father.

Finally, we have the father – the main character in this story and the one who represents God. His response to the two sons is not how fathers in Jesus' day behaved, so this character shows love far greater than any human could offer. It is in the father's response that we see most fully the exceptional compassion and mercy of God.

- We see an example of costly love where the father gives the son what he asks for – he divides his property, but also places his long-term security in the hands of his sons.

- Then the father is pictured as searching for the youngest son, longing for his return even though he expects him to be dead. The father's love for his son never stops.
- When the father sees his son in the distance, he runs to greet him - an action that would be considered undignified and publicly humiliating.
- And by going out to the lost son, the father was also protecting him from the hostility of the local community, and possibly even bearing some of that wrath.
- Before the younger son can announce his plan, the father provides total and immediate forgiveness by kissing him on the cheek, a public sign of total acceptance.
- The father then tells the servants to put on the son the best robe-his robe, then a ring and shoes

indicating the son is now a free man – the son has returned and is now given back the position of son.

- The son had totally rejected the father, and the father now totally accepts his son. The lost son is fully restored as if nothing had happened, and he can only now respond with humble acceptance.
- In the father's joy we see God's joy when those who are lost return, where the fattened calf identifies a celebration that includes the whole community, a time of reconciliation where table fellowship once more indicates acceptance and restoration.
- We also see that the father shows the same love to the older son. Once more, going out to meet him and facing public humiliation. But this time we do not know if the eldest son responds to this love.

God loves those who are inside and outside the kingdom equally.

Us.

Entry into the kingdom of God is a returning home, a return to the promised land spoken of in our reading from Joshua. And also, a story of resurrection as Paul reminds us, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation".

God's kingdom is open to all, because as we have seen in this parable through the response of the father, God is compassionate, forgiving and, full of grace.

- This is a picture of God's love, which is far more extravagant than human love, a love that is total, unconditional and forgiving.
- As the father offered his love freely to his sons – God offers his love to us all freely as a gift. It is up to us to accept this gift.

- Through God's forgiveness we are made not slaves or servants, but sons and daughters who receive our inheritance in full now and for eternity.
- Finally, what struck me as I was writing this sermon was the picture of God's joy in us seen in the father's joy for his lost son. We often don't realize that God finds complete, utter and perfect joy in you and me.
- This joy is not based on what we do, but is a joy based on our relationship with our heavenly father.
- But this also made me think about what I do and how I live. It occurred to me that it is very easy to see my relationship with God as a chore and not my joy, much like that of the older son.
- But even in the difficult times, even in the mundane or frustrating times, I can hold on to that joy which only my relationship with God can give.
- If we are part of God's family, we are surrounded by the generous love of God always. Our faith in

Jesus means that we live trusting in the presence and care of God.

Conclusion.

No matter whether our lives are messy or neat, we are all accepted into God's kingdom, not through our perfection or merit, but because of Jesus' sacrifice for us all.

May our lives reflect God's words to us, "Welcome home, you belong" and may we find our joy in the welcome of God's embrace.

Amen.