

I WAS LOST BUT NOW AM FOUND  
LUKE 15:11-32

How would you describe your relationship with God? You might feel that it is a strong relationship, secure in every way, being confident about your faith and sure of what you believe and assured of the promises that God has made. Or, you might feel that this relationship is a bit tenuous: you know that you have a faith, but it is a faith of sorts and you have more questions than answers and there are times when that faith relationship is stretched almost to its breaking point. Or you might not have any kind of relationship with God at all in the way of faith: you might want to know more about Jesus so that you can begin to believe, but at the moment that relationship feels broken, non-existent and you're not quite sure how to repair what is broken or create what doesn't exist.

So, who is Church for? Is Church only for people who have strong faith, who know that they are 'in' and can give good account of their faith? There are certainly times when we give that impression and there are Churches who behave in that way. They have a language all of their own and if you don't know the jargon-language you will never feel part of that Church. Or is Church for people whose faith is a bit strained, whose relationship with God is stretched and uncertain? Or is Church for people who have no faith, but are searching, who want to know what life is all about? Who is Church for? Who is the gospel for? Who is God for?

You might think that the answer to that question is obvious, but is it? Being 'in' or 'out' is a big question in lots of groups: you only need to watch the school playground, with even young children, to see that there are groups of people who play well together and are very definitely 'in' and there are some who are on the fringes and their body language tells you they want to be part of the group, but are being kept at arms length, and are quite clearly 'out'. That goes on all the way through life. Some groups or societies or clubs have quite clear rules and people only get 'in' when they fulfil all the criteria of membership. Is Church like that? Should the Church be like that? Is the gospel like that? What is God like?

These are the questions that Jesus was dealing with in His conversations with the Jews. There is a thread running through chapters 13-15 of Luke that is all about 'who is God's kingdom for?' Who can be 'in' and who can't? We saw something of it when we looked at the 'open door' in chapter 13 and who would go through the door; we saw it again last week in chapter 14 when we spoke about having seats at the banquet, people were invited and who would respond. The Pharisees were a group of people who would say that their relationship with God was as strong as it could possibly be; they were committed to keep the law and its commands and were unwavering in that commitment; they were committed to keep all the rules they could and make sure they didn't break any by mistake! They looked down on those whose faith was weak, or even more on people who had no faith at all; they were clear in their minds that they were 'in' and also very clear that lots of people were 'out' and should stay out because of the kind of people they were and the lifestyle they led.

*"Now the..." (15:1,2)* To call Jesus the 'friend of sinners' (as some versions do) was an accusation by the Pharisees; they saw all these tax-collectors round Him and thought this was a terrible thing; how could Jesus consort with people like that? These were people who were clearly 'out' as far as the Pharisees were concerned; the church was not for them or people like them; the kingdom was not for them or people like them; God was not for them or people like them. But for Jesus, to say that He was 'friend of sinners', was the reason for His coming. *"The Son..." (Lk 19:10)* As far as Jesus is concerned, the Church, the kingdom, the gospel, God, -all are in

some sense 'for everyone'; everyone has the potential to be 'in' and that's what lay behind the three parables about things that are 'lost'.

A word about parables first of all. We have looked at a number of parables in this series in Luke; the parables of the mustard seed, the yeast, the great banquet and now today the prodigal (or lost) son. Jesus tells these wonderful stories and we remember them and some of them have become part of our language. But we need to be careful with them and understand the parables in right way. They have one point to make and only one point: the mustard seed's point is simple: God's kingship is universal, the size of tree from small beginning shows that God's kingship extends far and wide; the yeast – God's kingship is all pervasive, His rule touches every part of the life of the Christian, in same way that yeast works all the way through the dough; the great banquet – God's kingship is ours when we respond to an invitation. These are not allegories: allegories are different and would give every part of story a meaning; but that is not what parables are; there is one single message in the story for us to consider.

The Parable of the prodigal son: "Jesus is dealing here with the one great fact of the father's pardoning love." (Morris) The story is of the son who wants to be independent and free so he asks his father for his share of the family estate; he'll have it when father dies, but he wants it now. His father reluctantly gives it to him and off he goes to a foreign country to enjoy his new-found wealth. He has lots of friends who help him spend his money and they party away, till the money is all gone. He has nothing left, and then no food to eat and no-one cares about him, he has no friends now. He ends up looking after pigs and eating pig-food (in a story to Jews, this is the ultimate ignominy!) What would he do now? What was left to him to do?

*"When..." (15:17)* When he realised what he had done; when he saw the state of his life; when he came to his senses... he decided to go home. He decided to go home and ask for a job as a servant on his father's farm; he saw this as his only hope. But he did so with fear and trembling in his heart because he had no way of knowing how his father would react. In some cultures, he would not have been welcomed and indeed thrown out because of what he did. Someone has called this 'the parable of the waiting father' because that's the heart of it. As the son goes home, his father is waiting, watching for him; he sees him in the distance and runs out to greet him and welcome him home as his son all over again. The robe, the ring, the shoes, the cloak – all these are signs of sonship, all ways of saying to his son, 'you're mine all over again!' They have a party to celebrate.

There is another son in the story; the elder brother who complains. *"Look all..." (15:29)* He's right! There is no doubt that he is absolutely right! His father says two things to him: 1) *"You are..." (15:31)* You have all that you need; you belong; all that I have is yours too.' Deep expression of father's love for his son; there is no more his father could give him; everything the father had, belonged to the son. 2) *"we had..." (15:32)* Here is a deep expression of the father's love for his other son. The father loves both of his sons and has love enough for both; both sons belong because they are loved by their father. I found this somewhere: "one son is on his knees; one son is on his high horse; the father love for both." The father's pardoning love is great enough to include both of his sons. That's the point of this parable.

There are two ways in which we need to apply this. First of all, we need to see ourselves in the story. Here's an exercise to do with this parable: read it in the first person. Instead of "the younger son..." read "I said to my father... not long after that I... when I came to my senses... I said to my father... my elder brother..." You get the idea. Try that; see what difference it makes to the reading of the story and you

might find that it has echoes with your life experience; but more importantly than that, it might help you see how God is to you; as well as an describing experience of life, it shows us what God is like to us: “While I was still a long way off, my father saw me and was filled with compassion for me; he ran to me, threw his arms round me and kissed me”. That is how God is. “For as long as we fail to recognize *ourselves* in these people we fail to recognize the *Lord*.” (Thielicke) See ourselves in this story and we will see that we are ‘in’ with God simply because of his pardoning love. The parable doesn’t tell us everything about the gospel; there are other bits we need to hear from elsewhere, but the parable does show us that at the heart of the gospel is the father’s pardoning, forgiving love for us.

Secondly, we need to see other people in this story. This was why Jesus told the story. God has grace enough for everyone. The Pharisees would be shocked by the behaviour of the prodigal; their attitude would have been reflected by the elder brother! They would have been on their high horse too! ‘Everyone who behaves like that, tax-collectors, sinners – they are all ‘out’ and deservedly so!’ So, now instead of yourself in story, read it again with the prodigal replaced by someone you don’t like, or a group of people you find it hard to love, or people you might think of as ‘outsiders’. How does the father deal with them when they are part of the story, the tax-collectors, the sinners? The father’s pardoning love is for them too. No matter who we put into that story, the father’s pardoning love is the same. God has grace enough for everyone; everyone can be ‘in’ as they come. No matter who we are, no matter whether our faith is strong and secure, or uncertain and ropery, or non-existent – God’s welcoming, forgiving love is the same as we come to Him through Jesus Christ.

Grace is the reason for all of us being here. Paul puts this into some kind of framework. He talks about what we are by nature, what we once were and says “*you were...*” (*Eph 2:1*) We were lost to God, away from home. “*But because...*” (*2:4,5*) Grace is God’s love to people who don’t deserve it; that’s us. None of us deserves God’s love; all of us have been where the prodigal was at some point in our life, having made mistakes, or wrong choices, or bad decisions, or we have wandered away from God, longing to be independent and free! But God’s grace is big enough to meet us when we’re lost, away from home, spiritually homesick and God draws us back, He leads us back and is big enough to welcome us with open arms. ‘I once was lost, but now am found’ – this is the amazing grace of God.

Who is the Church for? Who is the gospel for? Who is the God for? Everyone! God’s pardoning, forgiving love is for everyone as we come to Him through Jesus. As the father threw wide his arms and welcomed the prodigal home, as the father reminded the elder brother that everything he had was already his – there is grace and love enough for both; both were welcome, both were family, both were loved. Friends, this is what parable is all about, the pardoning, forgiving, love of the Father for us; this is what God is like!