

Loves Wins – Somehow

Reflection 27 March 2022 Paul Barber

Thank you John for reading this famous biblical story for us this morning.

It is a classic story exploring the dynamics of relationship and reconciliation through a story about family in first century Israel. I have summed it up by saying that ‘Love wins – somehow’. In the face of all that might hurt us or drive us apart, our faith calls us to declare that nothing can overcome the love of God.

A photo I came across shows a hand-written message on a simple piece of cardboard in the middle of masses of flowers placed at the scene of the Christchurch mosque attacks in March 2019 with the simple words “Love wins”. In the face of such horror, to respond with this declaration of love is an action that begins to make that victory of love already real among us.

Today I want to reflect briefly on this dimension of the Gospel story as it plays out in our own lives and our lives together as communities and nations. Especially in these times of great uncertainty, how can we possibly make the apparently naïve claim that in the end, love wins?

In the rhythm of the church year, these weeks of Lent are times when we are called to face the failings, the losses, the laments, the wrongs that need righting, relationships that need healing. It could be pretty depressing stuff – but we are in the know – the Easter hope is the answer.

So it is with the biblical stories, especially this one from Luke that are so familiar – we know how it ends.

We don’t know how the stories we are living now will end, but in telling the stories recorded in the Gospels, Jesus was trying to show us the kind of things that we can do that usher in the time when the love of God is shown in all its fullness on earth.

A couple of quick comments about parables.

The word comes from a Greek word meaning to ‘throw alongside’. The Bible is full of parallelisms that operate as parables or similes or metaphors – ‘the Kingdom of God is like...’, but there is something distinctive about the parables of Jesus that seems to set them apart. Depending on how you count them, there are at least 35 parables recorded in the gospels that Jesus is said to have told. Indeed, in the Gospel of Mark the writer comments that Jesus didn’t say anything without using a parable (Mark 4:34a). When Jesus was asked why he uses parables, he doubles down (Mt 13:10 –

17) and answers with a parable referencing the book of Isaiah (Is 6:9-10) ...”seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen”.

The parables as a whole are at times a thorn in the eye to the establishment and often like a set of riddles for all of us. They can be both simple and deeply confronting.

So let us just think about this story as illustrating the kind of relationships that Jesus thought would characterise God’s commonwealth of love made real on earth.

The reading today from Luke 15 is right in the middle of Jesus in full flight telling various parables. Chapter 15 has three of them and the reading today skips over the first two and goes straight into the **recklessly wasteful child story** (aka Prodigal Son).

A common theme in all three stories is finding something precious that has been lost.

The first part of the reading is there to remind us who the author Luke thought Jesus was talking to – the scribes and Pharisees, that is the religious establishment of the time - religious leaders and their advisors and rule-makers. In the modern context that’s me – I am a member of the parish council, I am attending the Presbyterian Church General Assembly next month – the chief rule-making and decision-making body for the national church. My day job includes briefing church leaders about social issues before they meet with political leaders. I am truly one of the modern scribes and pharisees. This is personal - I had better fine tune my seeing and hearing!

People like me then were standing by looking on with obvious disapproval at the crowd that was drawn to hear Jesus - “tax-collectors and sinners” which, without going into too much detail about context, probably means non-believers and those who collaborated with the occupying Roman powers – or simply ‘the wrong company’. He didn’t just preach to them, he welcomed them – in those days I guess that meant the Eastern tradition of kiss on each cheek perhaps or an embrace and sharing food with them.

So Jesus told these three parables at least to the crowd but Luke says he was really addressing the religious establishment...

The first parable is about the shepherd who searches for one of his sheep that got lost. About the effort he goes to and the celebration and joy when he finds it.

The second is a woman who loses 10% of her wealth – one of her 10 silver coins, each worth about the equivalent of a day’s wages (that would be about \$160 NZD today). If you only have \$1600 to live on, losing that much is a disaster and she conducts a desperate search and is overjoyed when she finds it.

Luke emphasises what seems the pretty obvious what the message is from Jesus to us in the religious establishment – take joy in bringing people into the community not excluding them – that is what honouring God means - come and get your hands dirty, so to speak.

Then he launches into the longest of all Jesus' parables recorded in the bible. You've heard it all before, you know how it ends

But allow me to offer some random thoughts

Lost sheep, Lost coin, Lost child – in each story the stakes are upped – 1 in 100 sheep, 1 in 10 coins, half my children.

In this longer story Jesus decides to dive right into the heart of this – it is not about sheep or silver coins, it is about our children, our mothers and fathers, our sisters and brothers, it is about people.

I mean we all have some sort of relationship to our pets or the animals on our farm. We all have some sort of relationship to our possessions and our wealth. Often it is only after you lose something that you realise how important it is to you, and the joy of finding something lost can give a new appreciation for all the good things you already have.

But when it comes to people it is much more personal. I am still thinking about how to deal with some of the issues this story raises – slaves are simply part of the uncommented scenery, women don't even rate a mention in the story.

Jewish feminist New Testament scholar, Professor Amy-Jill Levine offers some useful insight about how the original first century audiences for this story might have heard it.

- She urges us to resist the caricatures of first century Judaism or the tendency to see everything Jesus taught as radical and countercultural. He was a Jew speaking to other Jews about their faith tradition.
- She argues that asking for a share of inheritance was not unusual in those times and certainly not about wishing your father dead.
- She also reminds us that a Jewish man going to live in a foreign country was pretty normal in those days. There were probably more Jews living outside of Judea in those days as there were within the Jewish homeland
- It is not a sin to be hungry and to hire yourself out to a foreigner in the midst of a famine. As she wryly observes, Jewish law is law by which one lives, not by which one dies...

- The young man's contrition may well have been perceived as manipulative by hearers. Is he sincere or is it part of a plan just to go to daddy and sound religious?
- She pushes back against the idea of "oriental dignity" in the father rushing to welcome the son. Simple reference to other biblical sources shows there were plenty of doting dads in those days as well!

So we continue to explore our understanding of this ancient story to help us understand what it means for us today.

One thing I think it means for us today is that a reconciling community goes to great lengths to welcome and include – and in doing so we may also sometimes have to face difficult decisions to forgive even when the contrition may not be genuine or even absent.

Taking this reconciling work into the national and world stage may seem like a superhuman task beyond our strength. It is not hard to make a list of all the enormous challenges we face with climate change, nuclear disarmament, poverty, inequality, discrimination and racism to name a few.

But whenever I feel overwhelmed by the scale of a challenge, I think of the tramping trips I have done. It's a long way, but if you keep putting one foot in front of the other, in end you will get there.

Every week we have prayed for justice for the refugees held in Nauru and Manus Islands and in Australia. The journey for them has been unimaginably hard but dogged persistence from advocates like Amnesty International and many, many others as well as the courage and fortitude of the refugees themselves have chipped away at the political will of Australian politicians who have now conceded.

It will take much generosity for many of those affected to forgive Australia for its treatment of them in the face of lack of official contrition, but a measure of justice has been achieved. Let us make sure they are fully welcomed here in this country at least.

The spectre of nuclear war receded ever so slightly since the end of the Cold War but has never gone away. The war in Ukraine has now thrown into the spotlight this constant looming horror, with threats to actually use so-called tactical nuclear weapons. As if war was not horrific enough already.

This is another mountain to climb but I want us to remember today that our country and several other Pacific nations are amongst those who have led the development of the international treaty to ban nuclear weapons. Bans on chemical weapons and

cluster munitions already exist – accelerating the work to widen the reach of the treaty banning nuclear weapons, that is already signed by more than 60 countries, will build the moral pressure to end this madness.

Only five or so years ago such a ban seemed an impossible goal – perhaps in another few years it will be fully realised. The pathway to nuclear disarmament is not clear but we will only get there if we keep walking it and invite as many as we can to join us.

The last example I want to share today is about our own children in this country and feels very close to the spirit of the prodigal child narrative. It is about system change that has dramatically altered the way our police and justice systems treat young offenders.

Fifteen years ago, nearly 5,000 teenagers were charged in court, last year that was down to less than 1,500. Just five years ago in 2016 more than 640 17-19 year-olds were sent to prison. Last year that was down to just 120. The main reason for this change has been big changes in the way police and youth justice deal with young people and hold them to account for their actions. We all should recognise courts and prison is no place for young people and it is a proven pathway to further crime and or poor life outcomes for many of those young people.

I would not claim for a moment that our policing or youth justice systems are anything close to perfect, but thanks to the hard work and advocacy of many people, initiatives such as the Rangatahi and Pasifika Courts and Alternative Action Plans, mean young people are now have the chance to understand the impact and consequences of their actions but receive also a metaphorical (and sometimes literal) embrace from our communities that offers a path and the possibility of reconciled relationships, healing and transformed lives.

The lengths we have to go to in order to bring reconciliation will lead us to ask was it worth it? Was it worth Jesus boldly challenging the might of imperial Rome and its agents? Shouldn't he have picked his battles a bit better? We have to do a lot of relationship restoration in our lives, we do it every day, in the smallest things we experience right through to the biggest and most painful hurts. We do it as individuals, as families, as communities, and as nations. It is part of being human, part of being in community, part of understanding the divine. To seek to live the way of Jesus, where love and justice embrace, at personal, community and worldwide levels to create 'right relationship'.

That is the only way to be sure that love wins.