**Lent IV, 2025**

They say that familiarity breeds contempt, but more often, I think, it breeds plain inattention. That’s true, I think, of the most well-known of Jesus parables: we are so familiar with them that we don’t really pay attention to it.

I think of this as the ‘Children’s Bible’ effect: children’s Bibles are usually simplified, the language is easy, some of the details are smoothed away, to give something less complex. We can have similar versions of Scripture in our memories, with some of the edges knocked off.

But the edges are important. I’ve said before that no detail in Scripture is irrelevant, because we believe the Holy Scriptures to be divinely inspired.

So let’s look at some of the edges in this parable. Here’s the first: “he divided his property between them.” The Greek doesn’t say ‘property’ but ‘living’ – the word also means ‘life’. This parable is about more than property, about wasting money: it’s about wasting life. It also points us to one way to read this parable: the Father is God, Who literally gives us His life, to waste or not as we choose.

Next: “the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country.” Not just a journey to get away from the family, but a journey to a “far country,” far from home, far from God.

We know what happens: he loses everything. But there’s an edge: how does he lose it? “reckless living” is fine, but it’s a bit children’s Bible. The Greek word, sometimes translated ‘prodigal’, or ‘loose, literally means ‘without salvation’. So the sinner, who travels far from God, the source of his life, will lose that life through living without salvation, abandoning the salvation offered by Life in God.

Of course, the elder brother later adds some details to that account: “this son of yours […] who has devoured your property with prostitutes.” Typical older brother. Sins of the flesh, bought by bartering away the ‘living’ the life, received from the Father.

And then of course there’s a famine, which is ironic: even if he *had* any money left he couldn’t buy anything. The far country of carnal delight is ultimately unfruitful, *incapable* of giving life. And so to the pigs. We’re in pagan lands: Jews don’t keep pigs, and the fact that the younger son is reduced to feeding swine is a shorthand for how low he’s sunk. Our translation tells us that he “hired himself out” to the pagans. Bad enough, but the Greek says that he “joined himself to” the locals. He’s become like the pagans, and he wants to live like the swine, eating the carob pods they’re fed.

And then “he came to himself.” It’s a beautiful phrase, because repentance means coming back to who we really are, it restores something which is properly ours: our relationship with God. “I will arise and go to my Father,” he says: in other words, get up out of the mud of sin and return to God.

One of my favourite details is that he doesn’t get what he asks for. “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 as one of your hired servants.” A μίσθιος, ‘one-who-is-paid’.

But the Father has other ideas. “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran, and embraced him, and kissed him.” God meets us whilst we are “a long way off,” separated from Him by sin, running to meet us. In the ancient world only slaves and gymnasts run, and the running of this wealthy father shows us his compassion for his wayward son: he disregards His dignity to embrace him, to greet him with the kiss that signifies that he is beloved, one of the family, a son.

By human logic, the younger son is right: he *has* sinned, and he *is* unworthy of the name of son. But God’s ways are not our ways, and His mercy is broader than our imagination makes it. Far from recrimination, the whole family are called to “eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again.” And the parable closes with the biggest edge yet, in the form of the elder son, a warning not to make God’s love too narrow by our own lack of imagination, nor to refuse to celebrate someone’s blessings, or to ourselves withhold forgiveness, whatever they may have done.

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What we’ve been doing so far is reading the parable in what we might call a moral sense: applying it to ourselves. But there’s another way to read it, which Jesus also intended His audience to understand. He’s talking to Pharisees on the one hand and tax-collectors-and-sinners on the other. Jesus intends the Pharisees to understand that God’s mercy is wider than they imagine, and that, far from being cut off from God, the Gentiles will shortly be welcomed back to their Father’s embrace.

Hence the younger Son, who stands for the Gentiles, and the elder, who is the Jews. The gentiles, although sprung from the same Creator, and endowed by Him with life and other gifts – the ‘property’ or the ‘living’ of the Father – have wandered far from God, and by indulging their passions have been starved of grace – the famine – and become like beasts, not knowing their Maker – the desire to eat the pigs’ food, to live like them.

Contrariwise, though, the elder son, who apparently never strayed, proves to have problems of his own: he can’t abide the clemency his Father shows, and himself rejects reconciliation. His Father reminds him “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours,” as if to say, ‘you, too, have enjoyed my bounty, though you seem not to recognise your good fortune’ Perhaps familiarity has bred indifference in the elder brother’s heart, so that he no longer saw the good things around him.

I think it’s striking that at the end of the parable the younger son is within the house, celebrating, but the elder is outside, complaining. We aren’t told what happens next, and so that’s where we leave him. Jesus is telling the Jews that they to face a similar choice: accept that God’s mercy is not just for you but for everyone, or remain outside it.

The lynchpin of these interpretations is God, Who in the Incarnation disregards His dignity and runs to meet us, to make us one with Him, and to reconcile us to Himself through Jesus’ death. “For our sake,” says S. Paul, God “made Him to be sin Who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” Not just hired servants, grudgingly forgiven, but sons and daughters, robe, ring, shoes, and all, “a new creation” “in Christ,” Jew and Gentile, salve and free, man and woman. “All this is from God,” who loves us beyond our wildest dreams. Let’s not be like the elder son and spurn that love, but like the younger, and turn from our iniquities, and live.