STOWE 30/3/25

Prodigal Son Luke 15: 11-32

Our Bible reading today tells of 3 ‘lost’ things: the sheep, the coin and the prodigal son. And the Prodigal Son is the most beautiful story illustrating the love that God has for each and every one of us.

As we heard in the story, the younger son asks for his share of his inheritance and then leaves his father and brother without a second glance and goes and spends all the money on extravagant and wanton living. And of course the money runs out. So the son is left with nothing, miles from home and with no friends or family to help him and to make matters worse there is a famine. He ends up looking after pigs – such a disgrace for a Jew as Jewish law said ‘cursed is he who feeds swine’

This parable can be seen as a stark description of the human race, who take all the wonderful resources of creation and selfishly squander them. Many people sadly live selfish and indulgent lives far away from the love and influence of God. Until a day comes when they cannot manage anymore, when their own resources are not enough and they realise they need the help of God their father.

In the parable Jesus describes that day saying when the son ‘came to his senses’. Jesus is saying that when someone is far away from God, they are not completely themselves, they are not whole for when we try to live lives separate from God there is always something missing, even our joy is not what it could be if we were living in relationship with God.

In the parable the son, after coming to his senses, decides to go home and offer to be a hired servant or day labourer , which was a position lower than that of a slave. The son is definitely feeling humbled and sad and he returns home.

But, and this is the wonderful part, his father has never given up on him. The Bible says his father saw him when he was a long way off – the father was watching for him, eager to see him again and when he does the father doesn’t hold back, sulk, say ‘I told you so’, he is not resentful. Instead the father *runs* to greet his son. He is impatient to see his son, even tho his son has hurt him and done wrong, he runs to greet him to hug him and kiss him. This such a moving description of God’s love – even tho we have done wrong, turned our back on God and the teaching of Jesus maybe, God does not give up. He is watching and waiting for us to realise our need of him, to feel sorry for the mistakes we have made and to turn to him for help – and his response is one of love, unconditional love as he joyfully welcomes us home.

In the parable the son is given a robe which stands for honour, a ring which stands for authority and shoes which represents that he is one of the family. The son is not just forgiven he is welcomed as a son and someone important to the father. What an incredible illustration of the forgiveness God offers us through Jesus his son. We are not begrudgingly forgiven, we are joyfully forgiven. We are not accepted back as second class citizens but as loved and precious of children of God. We may not deserve this forgiveness but God offers it out of love, because of the sacrifice Jesus made for us at Easter.

Then we learn of the older brother, who stayed at home with his father and is perhaps understandably resentful or jealous of the forgiveness and wholehearted joy his father feels at the return of his wayward younger brother. But his father is sure; he replies to the older brother ‘you are always with me’ but I celebrate because your brother was lost and now is found. And there are 2 points here – 1. if God is always with us, we will have a life of love, joy and peace, even if things become difficult because that is what living in relationship with God brings. 2. If we truly love our neighbour (or brother in this case) as ourselves, then there will be no jealousy only rejoicing that our neighbour has turned to God for forgiveness and reconciliation.

If anyone ever asks me to describe the love of God, I tell this story because it is so alive, so full of emotion and so relevant to our lives today. If anyone is feeling remote from God or ashamed of something they have said or done, then all they need to do is turn back to God and this parable tells you what His response will be – running to greet them, loving and forgiving them and welcoming them back home.

Finally, the 3 ‘lost’ things are linked together deliberately – the sheep wanders off aimlessly, almost foolishly; the coin is lost accidentally and the son is lost by his deliberate actions BUT the love of God finds the aimless or foolish wanderer, those lost through no fault of their own, and those who deliberately turned away. I believe everyone needs to be loved like that, everyone needs to be forgiven & loved by God our heavenly Father, and our church has a part to play in helping the lost be found. Amen