

twelvebaskets



LENT 4C

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year C
30th March 2025



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

270 STF – Come and see, come and see OR

426 STF – Hark my soul! It is the Lord

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

357 STF – Jesus – the name high over all OR

367 STF – When I was lost you rescued me

Readings: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Hymn:

561 STF – Now I have found the ground wherein sure my soul's anchor may remain OR

536 STF – He's got the whole world in his hand

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

610 STF – Best of all is God is with us OR

598 STF – Shout for joy! The Lord has let us feast

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling OR

440 STF – Amazing grace – how sweet the sound

Blessing

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Call to worship

Come, by your Spirit, O God.
Come to set us free, by your love,
Set us free to be the people who are called to follow in your name,
And to bring love, hope, peace and joy to those around us,
In Jesus' name.

Amen.¹

Hymn:

270 STF – Come and see, come and see OR

426 STF – Hark my soul! It is the Lord

Opening Prayers

Lord of each and every family,
Each and every person,
Each and every community,
May we notice your presence in our midst this day, we pray, O God.

As we hold in our hearts those nearest and dearest to us,
We pray your blessing on them.
As we come to meet in your house,
We pray your blessing on each other.
As we seek courage to face the week ahead,
We pray your blessing on ourselves.
May we notice your presence in our midst this day, O God.

Lord we come in all thankfulness,
We come to offer our praise,
We come to be grateful,
And we come to recognise all that we have received.

Lord we come in sorrow,
For we have often fallen short of the love you have for us,
The hopes you have for each of us.
Lord we come to say sorry,
And know, even as we do, that we are loved and accepted,
Just as we are, and despite of all we have done.
May we notice your presence in our midst this day, O God.

May we feel the guidance of your Spirit,
O Lord, this day

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Tim Baker

All Age Talk

Have you ever lost something really important to you? Maybe a favourite toy, your homework, or even a pet? How did it feel when you found it again? Relief? Joy? Maybe even a little happy dance!

In today's Bible reading, Jesus tells a story about a son who was lost—not lost in a forest, but lost because of the choices he made. But the good news? He was found and welcomed home with love.

Jesus told a parable about a father with two sons. One day, the younger son made a bold and hurtful request: "Give me my share of the inheritance now." That was like saying, I don't want to wait until you die, I want my money now!

So, the father gave him his share, and off he went. At first, he had lots of fun, but soon he ran out of money. He had nothing left, and he ended up feeding pigs just to survive! He was miserable and hungry. Then he thought, even my father's servants have food—maybe I can go home and ask to be a servant!

So, he started the long journey home, ready to beg for mercy. But before he even reached the house, his father saw him from far away. What did the father do? He ran to his son, hugged him, and threw a huge party to celebrate!

But the older brother wasn't happy. He had stayed home, worked hard, and never wasted his father's money. He didn't understand why his younger brother deserved a party. But the father said, "My son was lost, but now he is found! We have to celebrate!"

Bringing it home – what about us? What does this story mean for us. I have three simple suggestions at this point, which we'll return to later in our service:

1. God's love never gives up. Just like the father in the story, God is always ready to welcome us back, no matter what we've done.
2. God celebrates when we turn to him. The father didn't scold his son—he threw a party! That's how much God loves and forgives us.
3. We are invited to share in God's joy. The older brother struggled to be happy for his brother. But God wants us to celebrate his love and grace for everyone.

Let's remember that God's love is always big enough for everyone. Amen.³

Hymn:

357 STF – Jesus – the name high over all OR

367 STF – When I was lost you rescued me

Readings: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Hymn:

561 STF – Now I have found the ground wherein sure my soul's anchor may remain OR

536 STF – He's got the whole world in his hand

³ All Age Talk written by Matthew Forsyth

Reflections on the readings

For those of us of a certain age(!) the parable we've heard read today was probably first introduced to us as that of the 'Prodigal Son.' However, if we turn to some popular modern translations of the Bible it may, nowadays, be given a different title: the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition calls the passage, 'The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother,' whereas both the New International Version and Good News Bible, 2nd Edition insert the heading, 'The Lost Son.'

Revised... The English Bible groups this narrative with the others in Luke chapter 15 under the general heading, 'Finding the Lost.'

Does it matter what we call this story?

It does matter if the given title then influences how we understand and interact with the text. Those who create the titles (which have been inserted into what would have been a continuous narrative) may be directing our thinking, not necessarily in ways that are helpful.

Given that old familiar title, should we perhaps ask the question:

Is the younger son 'prodigal?' Or is it the Father who is 'prodigal?'

Noting that 'Prodigal' is an ambiguous word that can mean, negatively, recklessly extravagant or, positively, abundantly generous.

(Question: Which 'title' for the passage (if any) do you find most helpful?)

We've just heard the passage read, but did we really listen? (Setting aside issues with amplification, we're asking about the engagement of our minds.) If we want to look afresh at this story another difficulty that we may encounter is that many of us know it too well: we hear the opening phrases and we know what's coming. From our time in Sunday School, or when preparing for Scripture Exams, as when sat together for Bible Study we've probably read it many times, so, did we truly listen to the reader today? Does familiarity breed boredom (if not contempt).

Do we come to Church expecting or hoping to hear the Gospel anew or resigned to listening to a repetition of what we have long known? Is there anything new to learn about 'The Prodigal Son?'

Interpreting the Text

This well-loved story is unique to the Gospel of Luke, as are the companion stories about things lost (commonly called 'The Lost Sheep' and 'The Lost Coin'), which immediately precede our story.

To whom was Jesus originally speaking? Can we claim any affinity with them? We were informed at the outset that tax-collectors and sinners were crowding in to listen (15.1) whilst Pharisees and scribes were chuntering about the low company Jesus was keeping. Jesus tells them his 3 stories, culminating with that about the Father and his sons, in answer to their grumbling (seemingly in the hearing of the tax-collectors and sinners). The stories about 'the lost' are a vindication of Jesus' decision to consort with sinners and they are part of the emphasis on the theme of repentance and forgiveness that is to be found in the gospel of Luke.

Jesus' answer to grumblers is in story form, it's a parable. If a parable is a story that is intended to convey one core teaching, then, it is often asserted, this story is but an elaborate illustration of God's concern and care for 'the Lost.'

Another time-honoured way of understanding this parable was that it (and the other parables about the lost) were extended illustrations of how God seeks out unbelievers.

Would such an interpretation be sufficient, or are they a denial of the complexities of this particular narrative? Surely, we are all aware of the power of stories. We know that a narrative or story can work on multiple levels (our difficulty with this particular story may be that we are still reading it at the level of our understanding when first we encountered it in Sunday School or school! Maybe we have been taught an understanding of it that we just can't relinquish).

Extremely popular at various points Church history has the tendency to allegorise the story: in one such interpretation the lost son was said to represent Gentiles who believe in Christ (people like ourselves!), and the elder son to represent the Jews (who rejected Jesus). The father was thought to stand for God. Amy-Jill Levine (author of a number of essays and commentaries on the Gospels) cautions against such interpretations stating that they not only take the parable out of its historical context but lessen the message of Jesus and bear false witness against Jews and Judaism. (Would the Jewish Jesus really have intended to teach something that could be interpreted to be anti-Semitic?)

Have you heard attempts to preach this story from the perceived point of view of every individual character therein except, perhaps, the pig whose food the younger son would gladly have eaten?

Clearly the story is peopled with a rich cast of complex characters and by concentrating upon the (universal) characteristics of this cast we may be more able to identify with the actors in the story:

The younger Son, who cannot wait for his inheritance and so asks to receive immediately his (minor) share of the property. In our time and place would this be akin to parents helping adult children to get their first mortgage or making a gift to their descendants now rather than the money being swallowed up in taxes upon their demise? However, in the culture of the time of Jesus this behaviour on the part of the younger son would have been shockingly disrespectful and unacceptable. Indeed, in certain African cultures, I am told, this would be tantamount to stating that he wished his father dead.

Yet the father granted his request. The story details how this son then squandered the money (he was prodigal) and was reduced to abject poverty. Having then to tend pigs (those taboo, unclean animals) whilst coveting their feed marks the nadir of his experience, he could have fallen no lower. From the depths of destitution he realised that even his father's servants were better off than he now was and so he decided to return home and throw himself upon his Father's mercy... Was he repentant or was he just as self-serving (and conniving) as he was at the commencement of the story? (Note: The Bible doesn't say.)

Is he the anti-hero of the tale?

The Father, prodigal in his generosity. If we don't follow the old interpretation that assumes that the loving Father is God, we can ask the question, was he a weak man, who, perhaps to 'keep the peace' gave in to the unacceptable demands of his younger son? (Alternatively, was he a victim? We might think of instances of elder abuse: this would be a safeguarding concern.)

Had the Father always over-indulged his sons, 'spoiling the rod' and failing to instil discipline? Was he oblivious to the hurt he might cause to the older son by giving the younger brother his share of the estate (rather like Jacob who showed favouritism when he gifted Joseph with a special coat). Is it surprising that his extravagant welcome for the returning profligate compounds the elder son's sense of betrayal?

Is the Father the hero of this story? Is he even a good and fair Father? Maybe he is like every human father: trying his best but sometimes making mistakes.

(How do your parenting skills compare with his?)

The elder son, the dutiful one who feels over-looked and unappreciated. There is sibling rivalry between the sons: have they, indeed, been treated unequally? In a dysfunctional family each son may have chosen a different way of trying to gain their father's attention. In the story, the elder son's pride is wounded when, upon his return from his work, he discovers that they haven't even awaited his return to start the 'welcome home' party for his brother and, to add insult to injury, he has to find out what the party is for by asking a servant.

The straw that broke the camel's back? Perhaps it is long-term resentment that boils over. Furthermore, it seems that the father has never heretofore told him how much he values him (and clearly this son needs that reassurance).

There is food for thought here, however, if we take this reflection too far from the actual content of the text we do so aware that excessive allegorisation—over analysis of aspects of the story—can obscure the Gospel or even cause aberrant readings.

The 'Touch' (the impact of the story on us)

As we consider those characters and their part in the story we cannot but read it from our own cultural context.

Perhaps the story is so relatable because it's about family relationships, which can be positive and mutually supportive and affirming or can become negative and toxic. When we criticise the actions and attitudes of characters in the story, are we being invited to reflect upon our own lives, asking just how functional (or dysfunctional) are our own relationships?

Incidentally, did you notice that there are no female characters in the story? Could a good (Jewish) mother have sorted the family out? Today some in our congregation will be celebrating their mothers/grandmothers, valuing the feminine input into family life, maybe with 'fatted calves.' Today is a day to think about families in all their complexity.

Remember, Jesus told his story about a family in answer to those who questioned his welcoming of sinners: as he welcomes us, sinner or self-righteous.

Come to the banquet.

Amen.⁴

Hymn:

610 STF – Best of all is God is with us OR

598 STF – Shout for joy! The Lord has let us feast

Prayers of intercession

There is a simple response to these prayers, when I say 'loving God' will you join me in saying 'hear our prayer.'

As children of a loving God who forgives us and who, when we return to him, welcomes us home and invites us to his party, let us pray to our Father in heaven.

God of love, you have given us the privilege to be called children of God, so,

Loving God,

hear our prayer.

⁴ Reflection written by Wendy Kilworth-Mason

God of love, we admit that our families are sometimes dysfunctional, characterised by fractious and broken relationships where
Siblings war against one another,
Children feel that they are not valued or are treated unequally by their parents,
Parents feel disrespected and dishonoured by their children,
and family members 'don't speak'...

Parent God, mend our broken or strained relationships,
Help us to show your love in our homes that they may be places of love, security and truth.

Loving God,
hear our prayer.

God of love, whose Son, Jesus, was raised in the family of Mary and Joseph;
bless parents, foster parents and all who care for children.

Today, as we give thanks for the love of mothers and mother figures,
We pray for the varieties of 'family' today,
For those where there are two loving parents,
For single parents and for others familial situations.

Let children know that they are wanted, valued and loved.

Strengthen families living in stress,
especially those that struggle to provide the basic material necessities of shelter, warmth
and food.

May your love be known where no human love is found.

Loving God,
hear our prayer.

God of love, we thank you for our other family, the Church.

We pray that all may find in her a home where the bereaved,
the lonely, the marginalised,
the rejected and all those whom society stigmatises as sinners may be welcomed and
loved.

In the name of the one who associated with low company as well as with scribes and
Pharisees, Jesus, we pray,

Loving God,
hear our prayer.

God of love, we each of us pray for our own tribe or nation and for all the nations and
peoples of the world.

We ask for peace, to enable families to raise their children in safety and security.

We remember those families forced to flee in the face of war, famine or disaster and ask
that they may find sanctuary
and that your love may bring peace to all your children.

Loving God,
hear our prayer.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Wendy Kilworth-Mason

Gracious God,
This world is far from how you would like it be, we know this.
This country is not what you would hope for,
This community has fallen short of your glory.
Help us to use these gifts, and the gifts we have received from you, to help bring about your kingdom, here on earth, here in this country, and here in our own community.
Amen.⁶

Hymn:

503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling OR
440 STF – Amazing grace – how sweet the sound

Blessing

Your grace has found us here, O Lord,
Your grace has set us free from guilt and worry,
And into the midst of all that this week will bring,
Guide us by your Spirit, O God,
Amen.⁷

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker