

Luke 15:11-32
Jesus is not very fair
Tim Anderson 3/6/17

We Australians pride ourselves on being fair.
This is the land of the fair go.
We have a fair pay commission to make sure our workers get a fair go.
And the entrenched class system of our English heritage
is an anathema to us.
Our convict roots and a good smattering of Irish blood in the nation
ensure that we will have none of a culture of hereditary privilege.
So it comes as a bit of a shock to us that Jesus was not very fair.
We think being unfair is the playground of draconian bosses
who want to grind their workers into the ground.
Unfair is when Clive Palmer siphons off \$70M from his Nickel refinery,
and then declares bankruptcy,
saying the company can't afford to pay the workers' entitlements.
Unfair is not Jesus.

But listen to the parable.
A man has two sons.
The younger one takes his half of the family estate.
He doesn't even wait till the old man is dead
before he blows his inheritance on wild living.
And then when the cash runs out,
he comes home cap in hand,
and the old man throws a party.
The big brother who has worked diligently on the family farm for years
has not even had a celebration of a quiet night with a few friends.
But when the profligate comes home,
it's the mother of all celebrations.
Instead of being treated like worthless traitor to the family that he is,
he is welcomed home with equal status to his brother.
The older brother is understandably put out.
And the parable finishes with the Father telling the older brother off
for refusing to celebrate.

It's a bit rich, isn't it?
I mean Jesus is not very fair, is he?

And this isn't a one off either.
Jesus has another parable where a man employs workers in his vineyard.
And he gradually gets more workers as the day goes on.
And at the end of the day,
the man pays the workers who worked only one hour,
the same as the workers who slogged it out for the whole day.
What an outrage!
That's not fair at all.

Now I can hear some of you thinking,
"These are just characters in stories.
Jesus doesn't necessarily endorse the father ticking off the older brother.
Jesus doesn't necessarily endorse the man
who paid his workers unfairly."
Oh yes he does!
If you read the stories closely,
you'll find that the Father in today's parable represents God.
And the man in the other parable represents God.
Jesus certainly endorses their unfair behaviour.

And it's not just in his storytelling.
Do you know what he said
to the thief and murderer crucified next to him?
"Today you will be with me in paradise."
How unfair is that?
That guy had lived the opposite of a Christian life.
And Jesus gave him a one way ticket to paradise.
How unfair is that?

When we buy a bag of cherries in the Anderson household,
we have to count out the number of cherries
that each person receives.
Otherwise there will be howls about how unfair it is.

No one likes to feel like they are missing out
when there's something good being distributed.
But Jesus doesn't make it fair.

Well how should we understand it?
Complaining about Jesus is not likely to lead us
towards what God wants us to learn from this parable.
Hot tip for Bible reading.
If you think Jesus is getting it wrong,
the chances are that you are the one getting it wrong.

So one general observation about fairness.
And one piece of context.

First the general observation about fairness.
As Australian we are accustomed to clamouring for fairness.
But would you really want God to be fair?
Think about it.
Would you want God to give you exactly what you deserve?
None of us could stand that scrutiny.
When we clamour for fairness,
we are comparing ourselves to the next person.
I'm a bit better than him over there,
so I deserve a bit more.
But that guy over there is not getting what he deserves.
If God is blessing him,
it's entirely because of God's kindness.
And when someone is being kind,
we are not entitled to clamour for a bit more
because we've been a bit better.
You can only clamour for what you've earned.
And what we've earned is not too flash.
"The wages of sin is death."
"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."
If you want to clamour for that,
go right ahead.

But if instead you want to ask God for his kindness to you.
Then you can't complain about his kindness to someone else.
Even if it seems like that person is less deserving than you.
Well you are not getting what you deserve,
so deserving has got nothing to do with it.

The concept I'm explaining is 'Grace'.
This is a parable about God's grace.
And grace does come into conflict with fairness.
Grace means God's kindness to those who don't deserve it.
You can't understand grace
while believing that God owes you something.
We live amidst a culture of entitlement.
Everyone thinks that they are owed something.
But God doesn't owe us anything.
Trying to work out what we've earned
will only take us down the path of the older brother.
And that's not a place we want to go.

Why not?
Many people as they read this parable
feel a great deal of sympathy with the big brother.
But Jesus told this parable
precisely because he wanted us to avoid the path of the older brother.
So here's the crucial piece of context.
This parable is part of a group of three parables in Luke 15
about lost things being found.
There's the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son.
And prior to relating the three parables,
Luke gives us the setting in 15:1-2.
Let me read it for you.
"Now the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around to hear Jesus.
But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered,
"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.""
Looked at in that light,
there's no question who represents whom in the parable.

The younger brother is the tax collectors and sinners,
and the older brother is the Pharisees.
And Jesus was quite definite
that the Pharisees were doing the wrong thing
when they grumbled about him welcoming sinners.
So what we are meant to see in the parable
is God's graciousness towards those who need lots of forgiveness.
And God's warning
towards those who see themselves as a cut above others.
Jesus has told these parables
specifically to address the situation he found himself in,
where he was being condemned for welcoming sinners.
The parable is about avoiding the path of the older brother.

Well this is a tremendously important parable for the church.
By its nature,
it's easy for the church to become like the older brother.
How does it happen?
Most people who have been in the church,
have been coming along for quite a while.
Some of us have been coming all of our lives.
I can only think of half a dozen Sundays
that I haven't been to church in my life.
And what tends to happen
when you grow up in that sort of an environment,
is that you take on the values of the environment.
That's what ought to happen anyway.
Each week you hear teaching about how God wants you to live.
And you might not be able to remember the details
of any particular sermon.
Just like I can't remember the details
of anything my piano teacher told me over 13 years of lessons.
But I know that at the start I couldn't play,
and at the end I could play to some extent.
It's like that with hearing Christian teaching.
You can't remember the details.

But over time it does change you.
And in the case of the church,
you have a community of people to hang around with.
And that changes you too.
You start to take on the values and behaviours of those around you.
All of us unconsciously imitate what we surround ourselves with.
But all of that should be good right?
Yes it is good.
But Satan is a tricky operator.
And he delights to spoil what is good.
And the way Satan delights to spoil the church
is by giving us moral improvement without the grace of God.
We take on the values of those in the church,
and so we instinctively imitate the upright lives of those around us.
But then a little voice appears in your head,
and you start to compare yourself with those around you.
And before long, instead of being transformed by the grace of God,
the moral improvement is about a competition to look better
than the person sitting in the next pew.
Before long, the church has come to closely resemble the Pharisees.
Before long, the church has come to resemble
the elder brother in the parable.

What are the tell tale signs of a church
that has become like the elder brother?
Firstly, their passion for mission disappears.
What does the father say about his prodigal son?
"But we had to celebrate and be glad,
because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again;
he was lost and is found."
God is in the business of finding the lost.
God is in the business of reaching out
with the good news of his crucified and risen Son.
When the church reaches out to the lost,
then it vaccinates itself against elder brother syndrome.
A church that is reaching out to the lost

will see new Christians in their midst.
And new Christians are a great blessing for the church.
There's not much that is more heart warming,
than to see people like the younger brother returning home.
And when your church has this experience regularly,
the joy of seeing God's Spirit transforming lives is a vaccination
against the hardness and critical spirit of the elder brother.

What's the mission of this church?
To help people discover Jesus and his purpose for their lives.
If we are actually doing that,
then we won't become like the elder brother.
Lost people are broken people.
Think of that younger son.
He'd lost all his money.
He'd had to swallow his pride and come grovelling to Dad.
People rarely wake up one day
and decide to discover Jesus for no reason.
It usually takes a crisis in their lives.
And if as a church
we are opening our arms to embrace people who have had a crisis
then we will be loving and accepting them
with some mess in their lives.
We won't be harsh and critical like the older brother.

We started Christianity Explored on Friday night.
That's good for helping people discover Jesus.
But it's also good for us.
It keeps our hearts soft and loving.

Passion for mission is not just local either.
Passion for mission can be expressed
as passion for mission across cultures.
It costs a lot of money to keep missionaries in East Asia
eating spicy food and playing table tennis.
And of course speaking to people who are lost,

and occasionally celebrating
when a son or a daughter who was lost is found.
And one of the things that encourages me about our church,
is the rock solid commitment of Parish Council
to giving from the church's budget towards mission.
We don't hear stingy talk about how individual can give themselves
if that's what they want to do,
so the church doesn't need to give out of its budget.
We don't hear platitudes like
'Charity begins at home'.
What we have is a rock solid commitment
to modelling in the life of the church
what we want to see expressed in the lives of the members.
A sacrificial commitment to seeing the lost found.
And sure that has effects
in the lives of international students in East Asia.
It has effects in remote Australia through BCA.
It's encouraging Hom in Laos through SparkLit.
But I think there is an effect even greater than that.
It has vaccinated our church against elder brother syndrome.
If you are caring for the lost with your hip pocket nerve,
you can't have the harsh and critical spirit of the elder brother
towards the lost at the same time.
And that's a great blessing to us!
Our giving benefits us more than it benefits the people we give to.
But in time I want to see more than financial commitment to missions.
I want to see a dozen people from Holy Trinity at SUTS.
I want to see teenagers at SUTS youth camp and not just mine either.
When Compassion comes later in the year,
I want to see new children sponsored.
I'd love to see the Op shop take on a Compassion sponsor child,
with the photo prominently displayed in the Op Shop.
That would be great news for the children sponsored.
But it would be great news for us too.
It reminds us why we are here.
To help people discover Jesus and his purpose for their lives.

And it stops us being like the older brother.

I said there are a couple of tell tale signs in a church
that elder brother syndrome is alive and well.

The first is the disappearing passion for mission.

The second is

being more interested in your denomination than the gospel.

So when people say, "I'm an Anglican."

That's a red flag.

We should be labelling ourselves as followers of Jesus.

"I'm a Christian."

Yes a Christian who happens to be a minister of an Anglican church.

But I am a Christian.

That's what defines me.

Now don't get me wrong,

I appreciate some things about our Anglican heritage.

I love that there's a strong tradition of preaching the Bible.

From Thomas Cranmer the first Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury,
to Nicholas Ridley, through Charles Simeon,

John Stott, Dick Lucas and Peter Adam.

We have a great heritage of taking God's word seriously.

But a heritage is just an accident of history.

You've got to keep it in perspective.

You've got to save your excitement for God's grace to us in Jesus.

"While the son was still a long way off,

his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him;

he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

The father saw the son while he was a long way off,

because he was scanning the horizon,

hoping that one day he would come home.

That's where our passion needs to be.

The problem with being too excited about your heritage

is that people get into silly tussles

about who's being the most faithful to their heritage.

And they get awfully threatened

if some Anglican Church is not Anglican enough.
And they take on the harsh and critical spirit of the elder brother.
By all means celebrate the parts of the denominational tradition
that help us reach the lost.
But hold very lightly to the rest.
Save your excitement for God's grace to us in Jesus.

Jesus was not very fair.
It's absolutely true.
Jesus was not very fair.
And you don't want him to be fair.
If he gave us what we deserved,
we'd be in a pickle.

Instead of being fair,
Jesus has a strong bias towards the lost.
In the earlier parables in this chapter,
Jesus says there is more rejoicing in heaven over 1 sinner who repents
than over 99 righteous people who have no need to repent.
God has a passion for the lost.
We need to take our cue from the Father not the elder brother.
Two particular elder brother type dangers to avoid.
The disappearing passion for mission.
The excessive passion for denominations.