

We continue to read from Luke 15 – last week we talked about the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Jesus continued: 'There was a man who had two sons.....'

And the story finishes 'this brother of yours was dead and is alive again he was lost and is found.'

Again the word 'lost' comes up

DRAMA

FATHER:

I sometimes wonder if I was a bit proud as a father. I had two sons and I gave them all they could want. I provided for all their needs, I gave them opportunities – they really had a great life. And the way the first 20 years of being a father went I thought I'd got it all right. I pointed them to the God in whom I trust, while recognizing that they had to find their own way.

Then one day it all began to unravel....

YOUNGER SON

I've had enough. For goodness sake, I'm 20 – some of my mates have all the freedom they want and I seemed to be stuck here, at home with Mum and Dad and my older brother who is such a pain. He always seems to do exactly what Dad wants, he works harder than me and he always seems to make sure that I appear in a bad light. Actually it's so bad I can't see anything changing - time for me to go. Not sure how though.

Oh yes, I remember the number of times Dad has said everything he has belongs to me and my brother. I wonder if he means that..... Actually that's not quite right, there's only two of us and Dad's been a very successful businessman – he's actually loaded. Not that you would know – nothing he has or anything in the way he lives indicates how well off he is. But I can't take much more of this, I'm going crazy.

FATHER:

When my younger son came to me in an agitated state one day and asked for his share of all I owned, I could hardly breathe. Quickly I understood where I'd gone wrong – I'd talked too much, been unwise in what I'd said. As I saw it I could go back on my word or honour what I'd said. My accountant did the sums and despite warning me I was making a huge mistake he made sure the money was paid into my son's bank account. Before I could say Grant Robertson he was off. And I was left with a son I hardly knew or even talked to. I don't really know what to do. I know doing nothing is not an option. I sometimes wonder if I should have let him go, let him find out what life is all about; maybe there are only things he can learn without me being around.

For weeks I would go and stand at the gate hoping he'd return; eventually I tired of that and when I wasn't working I just kept going over in my mind what had happened and kept asking myself what could I have done differently.

OLDER BROTHER

I don't know why Dad's so upset; I say good riddance to bad rubbish.

We never did get on; my life is so much easier now. I know Dad's finances have taken a big hit but he's such a good operator it won't be long before we're back in the black and guess what, it'll all be mine one day. And I might be able to buy a sheep run in that beautiful part of New Zealand called Central Otago.

YOUNGER SON

I couldn't believe my good fortune. Here I was free as a bird, I could do anything. And I did. Without Dad always checking up on me I discovered what I'd been missing.

Man I had it all – talk about wine, women and song. I also discovered I became quite popular. This was all I could wish for.

Then one day I went to get some money out of the bank and the machine said, 'not enough funds.' It said I had overdosed on my bank account. Later I learnt it meant overdrawn. You know what, all my girlfriends wandered off and the men I thought were my friends began to make excuses when I asked if we could catch up. Oh, there were a few who tolerated me for a while, but that dropped off soon enough.

Not only that, business confidence in the country I was in went through the floor and there were no jobs. I was desperate – picking through rubbish tins, sleeping on the street. It had all gone wrong so quickly.

Finally, finally I got a sort of a job, working on a pig farm – Dad would've been over the moon about that; but it wasn't a real job and I was hungry most of the time.

FATHER

I was beginning to lose hope. I used to expect him back any time but as the hours, days, weeks, months and finally years passed I thought this isn't going to happen. I then became very depressed; terrible company for my other son, my wife and the other farm workers. For all I knew he could be languishing in jail or worse still dead!

YOUNGER SON

One day as I was dishing out the food to the pigs, feeling incredibly sorry for myself, the thought crossed my mind that Dad's workers were better off than me.

They at least had beds to sleep in and food on the table and even though Dad worked them quite hard he was a fair boss, there were very few complaints about him. What could I do? Then another thought – I could work for Dad as one of his farm workers. Great I thought, but how could Dad ever welcome me back? He'd lose face in front of everyone.

I was utterly desperate. I kept going over in my mind what I could say to Dad. How could I put it, what would he respond to? Could he, would he welcome me?

I made up this speech and rehearsed it as I hitchhiked back home. By the time I got closer, I'd changed it many times.

I thought I'd better walk the last few kilometres home even though I was pretty exhausted.

I couldn't believe when I saw there was someone running towards me; running pretty fast I thought – IT WAS DAD.....

Never in my wildest imaginings could I have prepared for this. He threw his arms around me and hugged me so tight I could hardly breathe; we were both sobbing – probably something we'd never seen each other do before; even now I can't help crying when I think of it.

FATHER

He started speaking to me, I heard only some words sinned... no longer worthy....son. I didn't even know what he was talking about. All I knew was that he was back and that's all that mattered. When we disengaged from each other I immediately rang my farm manager and told him to go into the herd and choose the best calf he could find; I told him to get my wife to look out some really nice clothes and meet us at the entrance.

This was too, too much.

As I look back on that night it's a bit of a blur; we certainly had a great party and a wonderful welcome home but something didn't go so well.

OLDER BROTHER

As I said, life had been so much better since my younger brother left, I heard all this commotion even while I was working with the stock. Initially I just kept on working. When I'd finished I came nearer the house, I could hear music and laughter; come to think of it I hadn't heard either of those for a long time.

When I asked one of the staff what had happened he said, 'your brother's come home and your Dad's putting on a huge party to welcome him.'

I was so angry, I kicked anything in sight and let go a few choice words. Dad came out.....

FATHER

Well this I didn't expect. I thought my older son would be as glad as I was to see his brother come home. People are funny aren't they? He was so angry, I had to try to calm him down so we could talk – it wasn't easy.

He let fly – he spoke about all the years he'd played by the rules, done everything right, worked hard and always done what I asked – this was all true. But when he said I'd never given him an animal for a barbecue with his friends – I thought, well you've never asked me and I wasn't sure he was close enough to anyone to invite them to a barbecue. And then he got stuck into his brother, not without justification I felt – it got quite personal and all I could do was stand there like a donkey in a hailstorm and take it.

OLDER BROTHER

I let him have it, both guns blazing, I called my brother for every name I could think of; I raged to my father. I could see it was hurting him but I kept going. I was hurt and I was going to make sure everyone around me was hurting too.

To be sure he took it; listened. I could see he was trying to understand but I could also see that a light had gone on for him - there was joy in his eyes, hadn't been there for years; I couldn't deny this.

When I'd run out of words, he quietly said, 'you know everything I have will ultimately be yours – you've been with me a long time now and one day this will all be yours.'

Then he cut me to the quick.....

FATHER

'But can't you see we had to do this because your brother has come home; I thought he was dead, now I know he's alive; to all intents and purposes he was lost and now he's found.'

COMMENT

It's an oldie but as they say 'a goodie' isn't it? Remember it's a parable not an allegory – we don't know the whole story, so we must make some assumptions.

Let's put it back in the context of Luke 15 – three stories about being lost. Who's lost? Seems there are two people lost here – the brothers.

YOUNGER SON

He's lost because he wants, and what he wants ultimately leads to his temporary destruction.

- He wants to be free, as Freddie Mercury put it so well, 'I want to break free' - free from duty, free from responsibility
- He thinks only of himself; 'father give me what is mine'
- He doesn't understand that he's headed for disappointment – he didn't understand that what he wanted and the freedom he longed for could only lead to disappointment. There's a lovely statement about Moses in Hebrews, 'he chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.' The younger brother wasn't quite made of that strong stuff.

There's a sense in which many experience life like this – even us. Freedom, self-centredness, if only I had – but it all comes to naught; as the younger son so quickly discovered.

So what changed?

- He came to his senses – maybe a bit of insight – he saw what he was becoming; takes courage to do this. His give me/let me/I know what I'm doing, got him into deep trouble.
- He knew his need – for him it was a mixture of hunger and shame. The one thing a person needs before God can reach them to know they need him
- He remembered home – it wasn't so bad after all was it – it's not enough to be in need we have to know where home is.
- He had to believe his father would accept Him as we do when we come to God.

THE OLDER BROTHER

He's lost too in his own way – he lives by every rule except the rule of love. In his heart he judges; there's no forgiveness; no compassion; no reaching out to his brother; he's consumed with anger and frustration.

How will he find his way to the father? The beauty of this parable is that Jesus doesn't tell us. We must conclude that Jesus sees the P's and the TOL's from last week as older brothers – borne out by their unwillingness to accept sinners and tax collectors. They're lost but they don't know it – the younger brother at least knew he was lost.

My lived experience is that, sad to say, Christian communities have older brothers in them – harsh, critical, wanting things their way, always right but worse than that, withholding love, acceptance and forgiveness. BUT churches too have older brothers who've come home to the father, who've owned up to their narrowness who've come to believe that, **'there's a wideness in God's mercy.'**

In the end as I've said before when I've spoken from this passage – this is truly about the Father who waits for all his children to come home. So where are you in Jesus' story?

Running away; coming home, close but indifferent or enjoying your relationship with God the Father? Where else can you be? Let's think about this as we pray silently.