

Reflection

Alan Harper, Tuesday 26th March 2019
St Stephen's Uniting Church Sydney

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

I have a friend. Let's call him John, but of course that's not his real name. John rang me the other night, and the topic quickly turned to the terrible events in Christchurch now almost two weeks ago. John's a bit of a puzzle, because he's a regular attender at the local Catholic church, but he's also a big believer in the Hindu doctrine of karma. "What goes around comes around," is his way of putting it. You know that the bad guys out there will get eventually what's coming to them. All you have to do is wait. Karma will take care of sorting the bad guys out.

In his recent call, though, John went a lot further. You can forget about forgiveness, he said. Forgiveness just gives in to the bad guys, and they get off scot free. They need to suffer. They need justice. That's what karma will do. Forget forgiveness! That's a joke.

I had to call him out. "John," I said, "the world runs on forgiveness. If we don't forgive, we can't move on. We have to be able to forgive."

"So you're on the side of the bad guys, are you?" he said, getting a bit heated. "No I'm not," I said, "but if they really repent, then we have to be able to forgive." "The bad guys *never* repent," he said.

"But if they do," I insisted, "we have to be able to forgive, so we can move on. If we nurse our anger and our bitterness and our pain, we only hurt ourselves. Remaining angry at someone won't affect them one iota, but it will harm you. We have to be able to let go of our anger and hurt for our own sake, so we can move on and not be controlled by past hurts."

"You *are* on the side of the bad guys," John said in disgust at me. "And *you've* got a problem I think you really should talk to your priest about," I said. The conversation pretty much ended there, though I have seen John since.

Having championed the imperative to be able to forgive our enemies, the next day I turned to the Lectionary passage for today's service. It's one of the most well-known of Jesus' parables, even though it appears only in the gospel of Luke. The parable of the prodigal son is truly proverbial, and truly powerful; I've heard it preached on any number of times, as I'm sure most of you have too. And it's about forgiveness.

And I'm not proud to tell you that, every time I read this poignant story, I find myself siding

with the elder brother. It was the same when I read it again this time. *'Look!* the angry older brother says to his father.

All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"Yes!" I find myself saying. "It's so unjust!" The younger brother made his choices, he knew what he was doing, he chose to squander all he had – and now the father just accepts him back. And even celebrates, even kills the fattened calf for the feast. Of course the older brother, who's done the right thing all along, has every right to be bitter and angry at his father. Of course he does!

But then a very uncomfortable thought came to me. That's exactly what my friend John would have said. The younger son should get his comeuppance. Or more correctly, he's got his comeuppance, and he should be left to stew in his own, self-engendered misery. The bad guys never repent. They need justice. They need to suffer. And I have to confess that I was ashamed of myself.

Countless words have been written on this parable in any number of languages. It's been looked at from every angle, and with every nuance. It's been pulled apart, word by word, and phrase by phrase. No one doubts that the father in the story is God. The identity of the brothers is less certain. If you look at the context, Luke sets the parable as part of Jesus' rejoinder to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who criticised him for welcoming sinners and eating with them. So it's often said that the older son represents the joyless and inflexible Pharisees. Shortly beforehand, Jesus had called out their hypocrisy and lack of compassion, when they had been angry about Jesus healing a man on the Sabbath. *If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?"* he said to them.

You'll rescue an animal, but you think it's unlawful to relieve a human being of his suffering? Certainly, the miserable, unforgiving, unloving and inflexible elder brother in the story would have made a good Pharisee.

Sometimes, however, the two brothers are seen as the Jews and the Gentiles. In that interpretation, the elder brother, who asserts his own piety and self-righteousness and entitlement, stands for the Jews, while the younger brother stands for the Gentiles, who had strayed far from God and been embroiled in sinfulness; but were now welcomed back into the family of the infant Christian Church. Many Jews were resentful and unaccepting about that. That couldn't be right!

And sometimes, the parable is just viewed as a story about two brothers. It doesn't matter that much what way you read it, though, the message is the same.

Let's take a moment to think about the characters. First, there's the younger son. His greatest sin was not the squandering of his father's hard-earned money; nor was it his association with prostitutes. We worry about the property, because we are rich and materialistic. We're horrified that such accumulated wealth should be so profligately wasted. It's the same horror we feel when we learn that someone is a compulsive gambler, and that she or he loses every pay check before they even get home. And we're disgusted by the prostitutes because we've been brought up with a disposition to think that any sin of a sexual nature is far worse than any other kind of sin. Let's face it: most church communities will be far more comfortable with people who are full of hatred, or who tell lies, than they will be with people who've strayed in their sexual behaviour.

But *our* reaction to the younger son is not the way Jesus' audience would have heard the story. His real sin was that he dishonoured his father. Effectively, he said to his father, "Dad, I can't wait for you to die. All you're really worth to me is my inheritance. Give it to me now. My inheritance is worth more than your love for me, more than my duty to you, more than your self-respect or my respect for you. I want your money; I don't want you!"

When we understand that the father represents God, we realise how shocking are the younger son's behaviour and attitude. But isn't it true that there are any number of people in our own world who are very happy to indulge in the bounty of the world God has given us, but refuse to give honour to the God whose gift it all is? So in our time, so in Jesus' time.

But is the older son any better? Now in the Jewish Law of Jesus' day, you need to understand that the eldest son's entitlement from his father's estate was specified twice that of the other sons. So this case, the elder son will have been given two-thirds of his father's property. And the father later says to him, "... everything that I have is yours." The elder son has done very nicely out of his father's division of his estate.

But when you get down to it, he shows his father no more respect than his younger brother. His way of showing respect, in his own word, was by "slaving" for his father. He's "slaved" away, while nursing resentment of his father, and about his father. Despite all his father has given him, he accuses his father of refusing him even a goat to roast to celebrate with his friends. And he cannot accept his father's joy at the return of the younger brother; in fact he's angry that his father welcomes the returning prodigal. He disowns his brother by referring to him as "this son of yours." He disrespectfully vents his anger at his father, and refuses to join in the celebration. When you think about the elder brother like that, it's a lot harder to harbour any sympathy for him.

But of course the point of the story is made through the father. Whether the younger brother is just a younger brother, or whether he's the people whom the Pharisees were always happy to brand as sinners, or whether he's the wayward Gentiles whom the Jews so despised – whichever the younger brother represents, the father – who represents God – welcomes him with love and acceptance that you can only call extravagant, profligate, extraordinary! The younger son comes to his senses when he has reached his nadir. He

comes humbly to his father, not asking for, not expecting, not having any possible entitlement to either his father's forgiveness or his father's generosity, or even his father's acceptance. He comes in the hope that he might be allowed to be one of his father's servants. He comes fully repentant, seeking only enough of his father's forgiveness to be accepted back into the household in a lowly capacity. *Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son,* he says to his father.

But the father scarcely allows him to get the words out. He has already run to meet him; as the father, it was the son's place to come to *him*; but this joyful father is so overflowing with love that he sacrifices his worldly dignity, and his self-respect, and runs to his son, throwing his arms around him in happiness. There is to be a celebration, and the returning son is honoured.

Let us have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.

It is far, far more than the younger son deserved. But it is an expression of the uncontained joy of the father at his son's return.

When I think a bit harder about this story, I cease to identify with the elder brother. I come to realise that his self-righteous anger places a terrible barrier between him and his father's love. I wonder if he will repent, or if he will remain angry and embittered; if, in a later age, he may sit around waiting for karma to do its work. The story is open-ended. We don't know how it finishes.

No, I find in the end that I can only identify with the younger son. I have never been a spendthrift; I have never consorted with a prostitute. I hope I was never so disrespectful to my father. That's not what I mean. But I do know that, like the younger son, I have dishonoured God. I have accepted his generosity without showing him the respect he is due. I have wanted the privileges and refused the responsibilities. I have abused the gift he has given to me. Like the younger son, I have no right to expect forgiveness or acceptance from God. But I don't *want* there to be a terrible barrier between me and God. I want to stand in the shoes of the younger son, because like him, I have nothing to offer but my repentance. Yet the father reached out to him in love so overwhelming that it can scarce be believed.

The parable of the prodigal son is surely one of the most powerful ways Jesus used to tell us what God is really like. God so loves his creation, the story says, that while it is yet mired in sinfulness, he reaches out in profligate, sacrificial and inexplicable love, offering a way back for all who have turned their backs on him, but who come to him in repentance.

Amen