

Bennochy Church: 26th November 2017

I wonder how often we act like the elder brother? He is out in the field and he hears the sound of music. He asks one of the workers, 'what's going on'. The reply comes, 'your brothers back'. You can imagine him coming to a sudden stop, and wondering , what is going on here. He can't believe his ears. How could his father act like this?

He might be saying things to himself, like, wait a minute. I have done all the work here. I have kept the farm going. I am the one who stayed at home. I haven't squandered all the money. And what have I got in return? Yet this worthless brothers of mine returns home and he is welcomed with open arms. Hear the venom in his words. Feel his anger. Tap into his rage. Experience his frustration. He is the one who has done what is right and yet, it is his brother who experiences the fathers love. Maybe he then breaks into run and heads for the house.

He is so angry that he cannot enter the house. In Jewish culture, an insult to his father. He cannot bring himself to meet his own brother. Elder brothers were meant to help reconcile differences between their father and younger siblings.

We must assume that he knew about his brother's lifestyle. The stories had got back. The money was gone and now he is home. Meet him. No way. Be part of this celebration. No way. The resentment is building up within him.

As the father welcomed home his wayward son, so he now leaves the house to speak to the elder brother. We don't find out if any reconciliation actually takes place. The story ends here, with the elder brother literally standing outside. The story in that sense is a bit incomplete.

When I reread this story what came to mind were TV press conferences, where young people have disappeared, sadly happening too many times, and the parents say something like, 'it does not matter what you have done, just let us know you are all right. It is OK to come home. You are not in any trouble.' It is not about what people have or have not done. It is about the special bond, the love of the parent for their children. That is what overrides everything else.

Is it too easy to say that the father is God, and God welcomes everyone, no matter what they have done. That is an easy story, especially if we see ourselves in the role of the wayward son. There is comfort in thinking, God will welcome me back. Even when the elder brother refuses to welcome him home, God still forgives. There is no doubt that is part of the story. But It is only when we think of ourselves as the elder brother, does the story becomes a bit more uncomfortable.

We all have times in life when we feel a sense of injustice, and we stand in the shoes of the elder brother. We say, if there was any justice in the world, that would not have happened to me. It is the unanswerable question, why has that happened in the

way it has. It is a natural human response to that which we cannot understand. In our story, the father's response, in the eyes of the older brother, was just not the way it should have been. He did not realise, that even in staying home, he was loved by his father. Everything, was already his. His share of the inheritance was secure. That was two thirds. In the return of his brother, he had literally nothing to lose.

Families are not perfect. We all know that. For different reasons, relationships get fractured. Someone does something, in the eyes of the rest of the family, that is out of order and all contact is broken. If we are elder brothers, how does God want us to respond to the person who journeys home, whatever the circumstance? The young man in the story has already realised his failure, and will have to live with that for the rest of his life. And he will be fearing the family's response when he returns home. Surprised no doubt, at the father's welcome and wondering why his brother will not face him.

Maybe we are thinking about those words of Jesus. It is not an eye for an eye. It is not about revenge. It is love for your enemies. And in the heart of the older brother, the younger man is now his enemy. No longer 'his' brother, just his father's son. He wants nothing more to do with him.

Romans chapter eight talks about the power of God's love. Strong enough to embrace, when actually it is the last thing we want to do. When we want to stand outside. Strong enough to

have the love of the father, that overrides everything else, to forgive and to be forgiven.

Quote from A Lincoln. *The daily study bible, Luke p.205*

One of the differences between this story and the other stories about things lost, is that God stays at home. He does not journey to find the lost son. He does not seek him out. It is only when the son is seen in distance, already on his way home, does the father run to greet him. The son must first of all recognise what he has done. While this happens, the father waits.

It is hard to wait if someone you love is lost. You naturally want to get out there and search. We have seen the images on the TV. The community gathers its volunteers together, and begins its search to find the person lost.

In this parable, of the prodigal son, or the loving Father, or the elder brother, there is a great image of death becoming life and for us as elder brothers, part of that life is welcoming those who are difficult to love. That is what God's love for us is all about. It is because of his love that he waits. God in the distance comes to greet us. His embrace, the birth of a son, who said, I have come that you might have life, life in all its fullness. Amen.

Lincoln quote p. 205 [Barclay]