

Comfortably Numb.....?

An Uncomfortable Story

Good morning,

You will not be surprised to know that this sermon is on the parable of lost son. You may be wondering why we are going through this passage in such detail. But I read something the other day that said the purpose of scripture is to not wash over us, but to wash through us, changing our heart minds and attitudes. We may know more of God's word as years go by but how much has it really changed us? So your homework is to go away this week and really meditate on this parable.

This is a story that can become very familiar to us if we are not careful, just like the Christmas classic movies such as *The Great Escape*, *Elf* and *the Wizard of Oz*, we could probably tell the whole story without ever having to watch the film again or read the passage.

The Parable of the lost Son or it can be referred to as the Prodigal Son and Prodigal just means to drive away or squander. This story would be right up there with the Hollywood classics, the Son who takes his father's fortune, abandons his family, lives it up at wild parties, returns home with his tail between his legs and receives forgiveness and a hero's welcome and they all live happily ever after.

A great parable and we should never lose sight of the simple truths contained within this parable, that whatever happens in life in the words of Dorothy in *the Wizard of Oz*, there's no place like home, there's no place like home, there is no place like home.

And one day we will all find our true homes in heaven, and in it we will be treated no differently than the prodigal son. I expect the son had a great speech all ready to excuse or explain his behaviour but he does not get a chance to complete but a few words before his father wraps him in his love, puts the best robe and sandals on him and a ring on his finger.

I could only imagine what he looked like compared to when he left home, barefooted and covered in pig manure. The father could have said where have you been, what have you been doing, what time do you call this, I hope you have left your foolish ways behind you?

But he doesn't - he just celebrates his child has come home and he loves him unconditionally.

Reading: Julie's story (Bringing Home the Prodigals – Rob Parsons)

Today Ian has entitled this talk as the “An Uncomfortable Story” and Julie's story may have been uncomfortable like this parable. If you look a little deeper into this story it can become uncomfortable, bring up buried hurts and longings you have only shared with God.

I hope today it's a place where God can meet us and heal us, for we were or will be like the lost son in our relationship with God one day. I expect we all know of prodigals in our lives that have turned their backs on God and are in the pigsty. You could see this parable as one of the most dysfunctional families in the bible and the bible is full of them, beginning with Cane and Able. So in reading this passage have you ever wondered why the youngest son left the family home? Why he went so far away and effectively said to his father I hate you and never want to see you again?

Did he leave because he was always in the shadow of his elder brother, never quite living up to expectations, never quite being understood, never being approved of? Did he leave because he was a know-it-all and felt trapped at home by his father's rules and regulations.

I have two sons of my own and as much as I try to point them in the right direction and say don't touch that, you will break it, they won't listen until they have experienced it for themselves and broken it! They are the classic know-it-alls at 8 and 7.

Was it the same for the youngest son in the story? He knew best and there was nothing going to stop him getting what he wanted. But you can probably imagine the arguments that went on in the house before he finally escaped, as his parents or parent pleaded with him to stay, but they had to let him go in the end.

Have we ever had to let go of our children or our friends knowing that it will end in disaster, but we let go of them anyway. Is this how God sometimes see us, he wants the very best for us. But all we do is take what he has given us and run away from him, without a second thought. God calls it Pride, thinking we can do a better job of running our lives than he can. We will probably do well for a little while as the lost Son

did. Society today values getting to the top of the corporate ladder as fast as you can, but what happens when you get there? God reminds us if we are to sustain anything then we need to be secure in Christ and be of good character. Which is why 2 Peter 1 V 5-9.

God wants us to grow and enjoy life to the full but it must be based on his values and us reflecting his character in our lives and not the world's; how is your character going?

How long will we stay in our pigsty before we come to our senses and trust in God with our lives?

Fortunately the young son sees the error of his ways, repents and returns home but have you ever wondered how long he was feeding the pigs before he gave in and went back home?

What was it that kept him there in his uncomfortable numbness, how many times did he talk to himself - there must be a better life than this, but you can't go home, what would people think of you, nobody will ever want you, no one will ever love you, no one really liked you even when you bought their friendship. You had no friends at home, best to stay here and be depressed. Academics sometimes refer to this as listening to your Inner Critic.

This fear of not being accepted or loved in the son's mind kept him in the mess as much as his day job did. I have been reading a book recently about "Approval Addiction" by Joyce Meyer

She explores the struggles people face in trying to find self worth and their acceptance from other people rather than God. I suggest we all do it or at least I do, we don't say what we really feel afraid that we may upset someone, we feel happy when people like us or say good things about us.

Maybe you have difficulty in saying no to people, or you fear you may lose your job if you were truly to stick to your values. I wonder how much we compromise our own true freedom in pleasing other people.

Michel de Montaigne once said "He who fears he shall suffer already suffers what he fears". In other words, if we fear being lonely and don't talk to people, for fear of rejection, then we stay lonely.

Joyce comes up with this phrase in her book “Do it afraid”; she suggests we have to push past our own feelings and trust God at his word rather than the voice inside us that says we can’t, just as the younger son did.

We need to take courage in who we are in Christ and all that we learnt through the Freedom in Christ course. Mark twain said “Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear not the absence of fear”.

I would suggest that if we are going to be a radical Christians this year that we need to take God at his word. If we are to be truly free in Christ then we need trust in what God says about us rather than what we think other people think of us. Let God’s word wash through us and change us.

The reality is not everyone in the world is going to like us or agree with us and that’s not to say we should not strive to live in peace and bear with one another. But when differences of opinion happen we need to learn to forgive, but still remain true to who God has made us to be. It’s not easy and it takes time to change ingrained habits; God says in Habakkuk 2 v 3 in the Living Bible:

“But these things I plan won’t happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, do not despair, for these things will surely come to pass. Just be patient! They will not be overdue a single day!” Hebrews 4 v 15 “This high Priest of ours understands our weaknesses” Many of us, I would suggest, strive to be truly understood.

The younger son did not only need the courage to get out of the pigsty, but also to leave his old life behind him. I think we are naïve if we expect people to change overnight and think all was going to be stress free just because the son had come home.

If he is anything like me he would be mulling over in his mind what he had done, the money he had wasted, things he could have done differently. It could take him years to fully recover from his adventures. And sometimes those who have drifted away from God need time to come to Church again on their terms in getting to know God again or maybe for the first time.

The challenge to the church today is how are we going to receive the prodigals back into church, the rebels who can’t cope with the formality of church, those who have experienced God in different ways from us,

but know they need God more than ever in their lives but just don't know how to find him.

How would I cope if a group from Easter Team came to our Church bare footed and smelly - would I take off my shoes and give them my coat? Would I take them out to lunch? How would we accept them into our family here?

I went to an Engage Conference last November run by Care for the Family about how Church can engage with the community around it and I think we do well. But I was challenged by one suggestion that you put on a pampering day for single parents. Just one day where they can feel special, personally I can't see it from a man's perspective.

But I have had a glimpse through fostering of the messed up families in the world that's beyond the walls of this church and to make them feel special even for one day might be worth it.

Now I am not here to make us feel guilty, just uncomfortable that we are not doing enough and I am learning that God takes us and changes us according to his timing and agenda, and gives us the strength to do all things in his timing.

But maybe this is an uncomfortable parable because maybe God wants to change the way we do church, maybe once a year on a Sunday morning we go out and do something good beyond the church for that morning. Maybe we set up a small group for those who are struggling with their faith.

Maybe as a church we have to look seriously at family life - how we value it, which may mean doing less at Church. What should we do to promote strong families in this church? We have parenting courses but could we do something more with the help from Care for the Family or give more support to the Contact Centre?

But what we must avoid doing is reacting the way the oldest son did in saying it's not fair, I am the perfect one and you haven't given me anything, he got angry and sulked that things were not as he would have liked.

He could have been thinking 'I have done all this for Dad and he has not even said thank you, all he has done is sat in his chair day after day looking down the road for my younger brother these past few years'.

However in this case the elder son overlooks the fact that he has everything, when his father's estate was split when the younger son left he got everything. As the father points out in verse 31 "My son ..." He overlooks the fact that he has been eating the best of foods and enjoying a great life when his brother has been starving and up to his knees in pig manure. We need to be careful to use what we have been given, not what we haven't.

The challenge to us as a church is going to be in taking hold of the vision to be radical people when things happen we will feel are unfair or do not meet our standards of how things should be done, how are we going to react? But again we need to be careful not to react based on our feelings but on what God is saying to us and it's not going to be easy.

If I am honest, last year was one of the hardest years I have ever had to face and I almost left the church. I felt lonely, abandoned, mistreated and I was as lost as the youngest son in the story. I had to learn how to forgive in a deeper way, not because I wanted to but because that's what God wanted me to do.

The challenge for me in this parable is how will I react when the prodigals come back to this church, how often do I pray for those who are far from God to know his love in their lives? How will I let God change my life through this passage over the next few weeks?

When it comes to the crunch will I be able to love unconditionally as the father does in this story?

Preached in Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 17th Jan 2010 by Ian Larkham