

COMFORTABLY NUMB

A STUNNING SILENCE

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. (Luke 15 v 11-13)

What do you find in these verses that shocks you?

Because we sometimes don't understand the context to these stories we sometimes miss things, don't we? But the son's request for his inheritance was shocking to the hearers of this story.

You will have heard it said that this was really the same as saying to his father: “I wish you were dead!” Some commentators would say his request was appalling. It has been described as childish, despicable and too unthinkable to contemplate. We can well understand these reactions because even to us this seems an extraordinary request.

Perhaps too we are shocked by the Father who lets his son get away with his request. Actually that would have shocked the listeners too! They would have expected, in line with the culture of the day and with how families operated, this request to be met with a stern refusal. Actually this was an insult that should have been dealt with severely. Not only would the request have been met with a stern refusal, but also with the younger son being driven from the family home. He was no longer part of the family. He had made a request that he had, in truth, no right to make and it would have met with the appropriate response. The Father's response is therefore profoundly shocking!

We too might be shocked by the contrast the story paints between the Father and the younger son. The son is guilty of quite outrageous sin and blatant selfishness. The Father is shown demonstrating outrageous grace and love to his son, who simply doesn't deserve it! Does that remind you of anything or anyone else? Perhaps, truth be told, it's a bit closer to home than we'd like to admit ...unless, of course, we've become comfortably numb!

The nature of the Father's love in this story is quite shocking too isn't it? This is the love that is big enough and strong enough to give the freedom to reject that love. Friends, we always have a choice: the choice to respond or ignore; to embrace or reject; to follow or to go our own way; to be rescued or remain in pride. The choice of salvation is always an invitation...what do you choose friends?

Perhaps another thing that would have shocked the listeners is that the Father in the story simply doesn't act like a father, certainly not like an earthly father of that time and in that culture. But then, that's exactly the point there isn't it! The story is deliberately shocking! This Father isn't like an earthly father – and he's not meant to be - well done! The father in the story isn't meant to be a Near Eastern Patriarch. The point here, the shocking truth is that God simply isn't like any earthly father - he's selflessly loving.

Up to this point the whole story is a shock! Because by now the son should be on a one way ticket out of the family home in utter disgrace having done great damage to the family name. Honour would probably ensure he was never able to return. The only possible way back would be for him to go off and return with enough money to repay the family the money he took. But there is another shock - even in these first verses of the story. You won't be able to read it, but because we don't always appreciate the context, we probably miss it.

Actually the shock is what the parable doesn't say - there is a stunning silence. Silence can be very powerful can't it? I remember when Holy Cross School, where I was teaching in Crawley, was going to close. After the decision had been made, Bishop Cormac Murphy O'Connor came to the school to speak to the staff (he was then Bishop of Arundel and he later became the Archbishop and head of the

Church of England!) He appealed to us as staff not to leave the school as it approached closure, but to stick with it to the end - to be loyal he said. When he'd finished he asked if anyone wanted to speak or ask any questions, but he was met with a stunning silence. And sometimes silence speaks louder than words doesn't it?!

What Jesus doesn't say in these verses is shocking! What Jesus doesn't say is something like this : "when the younger son asked for his inheritance, the older son, recognising his duty to his father and the family, intervened and tried to mediate to see if there was any possible way he could reconcile his brother to his father."

In a Near Eastern family this is exactly what would happen if a conflict broke out - a mediator would be called for. Negotiations would go through a third party so that both aggrieved parties could save face and here, this should be done by the older brother - it would be his responsibility and in Near Eastern culture. This remains today the expected course of action in this kind of family dispute, big brother would act as peace maker. In this story his younger brother is about to set out on a road that will, in all likelihood, be a disaster for all involved, and he does nothing. There is a stunning silence.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God"

There are many elements in this story that show a contrast, this is one of them! The older brother is and remains silent. In contrast, the peacemakers take on the family likeness shown in Jesus. I wonder how many people have walked away from the community of church, or are drifting away right now because of a stunning silence.

Now we can beat ourselves up with thinking that when people walk away it is always our fault – or we could have prevented it. That's simply not true – some people will walk away from church or from God or both and there's nothing we can do to stop that happening. But, perhaps too, we must face the challenge that there is sometimes a stunning silence on our part - we do nothing to prevent people walking away. Just as we would love to see our prodigals return, so

perhaps we would do well to help others stay! I think the challenge here is as big as the challenge to welcome back those who have left.

It might get a bit messy if the prodigals return – because it may mean we have to change as a community but perhaps there are some people here who, in truth, we really hope don't stay here! I remember very early in my ministry having a shocking thought. I remember thinking one day, that it might be a lot easier if the difficult people left the church. I don't have anyone or any specific situation in mind let me assure you! I do vividly remember thinking that if people who I found difficult came to me and told me they were going to leave the church – what would I do? What would I say? Just the thought of it shocked me – that I was thinking it might be good if difficult people left!!

At one level it would certainly be easier! But it begged the question – what kind of church would it be if it only had people I liked, got on with, always agreed with.... I came to the conclusion it was a dangerous way to think because I would be the only person left in the church. It was a scary and shocking thought!

The truth is, of course, the church is made up of a whole load of broken instruments. We are not always going to get along, see eye to eye, agree, like the same things, arrive at the same conclusions, share the same dreams, engage in the same way, understand at the same level or even share the same theology! But all people are welcome, all people are valuable, all are deeply, deeply loved by a gracious and generous heavenly father. His love is able to encompass all of us – that's not at issue. What is sometimes at issue, is how much our love for one another reflects his love for us.

I never want to become comfortably numb to people leaving the church! Yes there's a bit of selfishness in that – after all I'm the Minister so what does it say about me and what I'm doing? But I hope too there's a bit of the Kingdom of God in it too – I don't want anyone to walk away from God – ever! Question is – how much am I prepared to respond when I see it happening? How about you?

One of the Thrusts we talked about yesterday at Vision Day is, "Wholeheartedly Together". That's what we want to be as a community of the people of God –

wholeheartedly together. It comes from our Vision Statement that we will naturally be radical followers of Christ – who enjoy each other! The thrust says this: “We will be kingdom people who fully embrace community and are able to celebrate variety in order to serve one another authentically.”

That’s what we are working towards and we’ve got some ideas about how we might do that (you can get a copy of thrusts and see what you think).

I sometimes wonder how much it’s about the art of noticing:

- *Noticing when someone else is struggling*
- *Noticing when someone else is absent*
- *Noticing when someone else needs some help*
- *Noticing when work is challenging*
- *Noticing when family life is not the blessing it can be*
- *Noticing when something I’ve said or done has caused hurt*
- *Noticing when someone is being drawn away from following Christ and being a radical disciple.*

We put a lot of emphasis on small groups because that’s the place where we can help and support one another in ways we can’t do with everyone. Small groups can be our strong places. Friends, I urge you to engage with small groups that can hold you in difficult times.

But friends, it’s more than that. Who haven’t you seen for a while? Who’s missing? Why not send a card, pick up the phone, write a note? You could be the difference and prevent someone walking away. What do you do when someone upsets you? Or you upset them? We are called to a ministry of reconciliation.

Friends, I certainly don’t find that easy, but perhaps I should at least try. Friends, I need people like Sandra around me to tell me when I’ve got it wrong; when I need to change; when I need to say something or do something differently. I need her to challenge my thinking, my speaking, to tell me when what I want to do is not right. We need to mediate for each other.

Perhaps it takes great courage to be a peacemaker – but what is the alternative? It is that we see people walk away from each other, from God and from church, and that is a tragedy.

This story that Jesus told should never have got past verse 3 – it should never have got that far! I guess that's true in church sometimes the challenge is for us not to become comfortably numb to those aren't here, or those who are struggling. And the uncomfortable truth is that we are all to take the part of the older son – it is the ministry of reconciliation.

As we take time to reflect now there are two things I'd ask you to reflect on:

1. Who is missing? Or struggling?
2. What will you do to prevent a parting?

Let us pray that in this church, this community, this family we won't become comfortably numb and we won't leave a stunning silence.

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 7th February 2010 by Rev. Ian Phillips.