

Comfortably Numb....?

YOU'RE WELCOME

What has he done? This is a mess and it's not getting better, if anything it's getting worse – and there's no way out! He's taken all the money – everything he can get and more. He's had some good times – but now even they don't look so good. The money's gone, the friends too, and the whole thing has turned into the nightmare it was never going to be. This was supposed to be freedom. This was supposed to be a young man in charge of his destiny, but now he's in the worst of all possible worlds!!! And there's no way out. Unless..... Unless..... unless he takes the biggest gamble of his life ... and goes home!

He knows he can never go home. He knows he's betrayed the family and broken the family honour. He knows he can never redeem himself – he has nothing with which to pay back the money he took. He knows he has no hope of earning that money, not now after what's happening, he's a laughing stock and no-one wants to know him. He knows what will await him if he does go home. He's seen it before – it's happened to others. He even knows its name. It means: “cutting off!” If he goes home kezazeh would begin.

Kezazeh he knows is like a funeral for someone who's not yet dead – a final ceremony from which you couldn't come back. He knows full well he wouldn't escape it because he had lost his inheritance among Gentiles. If he goes home Kezazeh begins: “You're nothing; banished; unwelcome here; be gone for good; let others be warned – this could happen to you too.” He's seen it – but now it will happen again to him! As soon as someone saw him approaching the village it would start. News travels fast in small Near Eastern communities and it wouldn't be long before someone would spot him.

They know what he's done – his appearance would provoke a response. He would be intercepted long before he got anywhere near his father's house. The ritual would begin; the smashing of jars containing parched corn and nuts while

they shouted his name. Everyone would know he was here – and the symbolism was clear: shards of clay strewn across the sand never to be joined again – this relationship is irretrievably shattered. This person is totally cut off from the community. He knows he stands no chance of forgiveness: he lost all his inheritance; he's lost it among the Gentiles; he's been living with pigs – the animal most despised in his culture. He was living the nightmare he never thought would happen.

The only slender ray of light was that he might work to pay off his debt – but that would take years. If he goes back as a servant it might just be possible, but he's got to get as far as his father for that even to be a possibility. He'll have to get past the angry villagers. But... but... perhaps a little selfishly he figures that going home is still his best move, maybe his only move.

And its not long before he sees a figure on the horizon. His head pounds, his palms are sweaty – this is it! He's been spotted, it won't be long before the crowd gathers to hurl its insults and smash their jars. Here they come – it won't be long now!

The first figure is moving fast – and as he focuses his gaze on this figure he is confused. Perhaps his lack of food and the long, tiring journey in the hot sun is causing his eyes to play tricks on him. Because the man running towards him.... the leader of the crowd who will surely be following... looks like he remembers his father! The crowd following behind desperately trying to keep up are ... his servants. This didn't make any sense, his father, any father, any man with any self respect didn't run in public! In fact the more dignity a man had, the slower he would walk. Just the clothes they wore made it almost impossible – that long robe didn't allow a man to run. But more than that – much more than that – in order to run you had to lift up your robe and expose your legs. Rules of culture made that a shameful and humiliating act – a man with any self respect simply wouldn't do it! Truth is this was such a shocking thing for a man do that Arab translations of this story omitted any reference to him running – he simply went. Here, this man runs in broad daylight it seems.

His father.... running to meet him.... this is not at all what he was expecting. His father, tossing his dignity and self respect aside and running towards him! He must have been watching and waiting if he was the first to get to his son, and yet there was more.... much more! He kissed his son – a sign of forgiveness, peace and love, a symbol of reconciliation. His father gives his son a robe before he even has a chance to get cleaned up. He wants to cover his son's shame and for the villagers to realise there would be no Kezazeh beginning today!

“This is my son!” is the strong message to the gathering crowd. The ring, probably a signet ring used to stamp legal documents, put on the finger of the son who has squandered the family inheritance. An immense display of trust in a wanderer returned! To put shoes on his feet was profound but simple: slaves go barefoot, sons and family wear shoes! To go barefoot was also to show penitence, to give him shoes his father made a powerful statement: “Wipe away your tears, cancel your “make me your servant” speech, you are home as a fully restored son.” The Kezezeh cancelled. A shocking, yet generous welcome in its place.

The church is called to welcome absolutely anyone! This powerful but shocking story reminds us of this truth: if God welcomes anyone, then the church welcomes anyone... absolutely anyone! That must be true regardless of race, colour, sexuality, politics, past or present sin. If we, or any church, want to describe itself as a biblically functioning church then welcome is not an option. When Jesus stands on a hillside he looked around at all the wrong kinds of people and said: “You’re welcome.”

You’re welcome: the outcast, the shabbily dressed, the mute, the deaf, the lame, widows, the thief, the murderer, the physically repulsive, those who smell bad, the twisted, the misshapen, the deformed, the too big, the too little, the too loud, the fat, the bald, the old, the drop outs and the burn outs, the broke and the broken, the drug addict, the HIV positive, the herpes ridden, the barren, the pregnant too many times or at the wrong time, the incurably ill, the unemployed, the underemployed, the unemployable, the shoved aside, the lonely, the incompetent, the stupid, the emotionally starved and the emotionally dead, the

brutal and the bigoted, the drug lords and the pornographers, the adulterer, the homosexual and the lesbian, the terrorist, the sadist, the perverted, the filthy and the filthy rich, and the paedophile.

Grace means we should welcome anyone because we exist for all people. We do have to be responsible in how we handle some people – for example we would need to think very carefully about how we integrate a known paedophile into a community. But the challenge is, if they find a welcome in the Kingdom of God, they should find a welcome among his people.

Friends, how are we doing? How are you doing?

Our new vision statement reads:

“By 2015 we will naturally be radical followers of Christ.

Caught up in Him

Enjoying each other

Transforming communities

And then some.....

If we are by nature radical followers of Christ we will do the things he did, say the things he said, see people the way he saw them, and we will welcome those he welcomed.

I was chatting to another minister in the town the other day he was telling me that in his previous church they had a phrase that helped them think and act like Jesus did. It was a phrase they sort of stumbled across but became a very powerful thing in the life of that particular church. As we were chatting it struck me that this particular phrase should be very powerful in every church – and it should be a very powerful phrase in this church too! It’s a very simple phrase – you’ll have heard it before. Archbishop William Temple managed to make it into a complicated sentence when he once said that the church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of its non-members! The phrase is quite simply: “It’s for the others!” The others – those outside the church, the kingdom, the knowledge

and love of the one who loves them enough to pick up his robe, bare his legs and run unashamedly in broad daylight to meet them along the way!

Friends, if we are to be radical followers of Christ – we will do the same. If we are caught up in Him and taking on the family likeness we will do the same. If we are enjoying each other we are living for others; if we are transforming communities we are looking to and loving the others. And then some.... is never, ever about self, it's always, always, always about others. Whichever way you slice up this vision statement it's for the others. And if we, or any church, wants to centre itself around the life of Jesus and therefore the others it will need a radical and inclusive welcome to all.

Perhaps, friends we will need to re-examine our attitudes to those whose lifestyles we might agree with. How do we respond to issues like gay and lesbian couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples – which is more and more common – who want to be part of our community? Accepting people does not mean we agree with them – their lifestyle or their theology. Not long ago I was chatting to someone about the issue of homosexuality. I wanted to listen to what they had to say and I long for them to be part of church. But I found I didn't agree with how they understood the issue theologically. I'm going to be brutally honest for a moment; when I read this list see if any of them apply to you. If they do perhaps you should consider leaving the church if we are not to welcome all people:

- People who are unwilling to tithe properly or give generously
- People who have a tendency to gluttony
- People who gossip – speaking of others in ways that are not helpful
- Those who have been tempted by pornography
- Those who have unresolved issues in relationships
- Those who have yet to forgive
- Those whose hearts are proud.

I could go on, but even with this list – I'm out! Perhaps a further challenge comes from welcoming those whose journey is still in progress. It is commonly assumed and taught that the son was fully repentant when he "came to his senses" and

returned home. That may be true but it may not be. “He came to his senses” could be translated “he took an interest in himself!” It is possible that the son’s real intention is simply to look out for himself. Interestingly for 1,800 years Near Eastern translations of this story include no hint that the prodigal son was repentant. When he does get home he quotes directly from Pharaoh King of Egypt when he says : “I have sinned against heaven and against you.” (Exodus 10 v 16) Pharaoh said this between plagues 8 and 9 when he just wanted the plagues to stop but had no intention of turning to God as plagues 9 and 10 testify! The people listening to this story would not have missed the point Jesus was making, and the point for us is we don’t wait for people to be fully repentant before we welcome them!

Friends, one of my great sadnesses is that as a community we struggle to get volunteers to serve on our Welcome team!

The son received a wonderful welcome, far beyond what he might have hoped or wished for. Friends, we have all known the wonderful, welcoming grace of God towards us. Let us not become comfortably numb so that we can extend a welcome to others.

Amen.