

Signs of Life – A GOSPEL People

A GOSPEL GOD.

So... How are you doing?

How are you doing at being a GOSPEL person?

How much are you a person of Grace: how much are you motivated by God's free gift of love in all you do?

How are you doing with One Another: how real are you?

How's your heart: how are you serving those around you?

How are you doing at sharing the Good News of Jesus with people who don't know Him?

On the basis that God never gives nothing, how are you using your gifts?

How are you living: how are you using your time, talents and possessions?

How are you doing?

I'm going to read a very familiar story to you and as I do I want you to ask yourself this question: "What is the most shocking part of this story?"

¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ "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. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw

him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ (Luke 15 v 11-32)

Ok – take a moment to discuss with those around you what you think is most shocking.

There are, in truth, a lot of shocking things in this story. I’m sure you will have discussed many of them. The younger son’s request for his inheritance was certainly shocking to the hearers of this story. One way of interpreting the request would be to say the son says: “I want your stuff, but I don’t want you!” to his dad! It’s rightly understood to mean the son wishes in effect, the father dead. The son’s request has been described as childish, despicable and too unthinkable to contemplate. The hearers of the story would think of this request as nothing other than extraordinary.

Perhaps what is shocking is a father who lets his son leave. More than that – who doesn’t even seem to challenge the request his son has made. Certainly the culture of the day would have demanded the request to be met with a stern refusal. It would also have demanded that the response to such a request be severe, resulting in the son being driven out of the home rather than him leaving with his inheritance. This son had made a request he had no right to make, and he should no longer be treated as part of the family.

What is also shocking is the contrast between the actions of the younger son and his father. One demonstrates quite blatant and outrageous selfishness, the other extends outrageous grace and love.

We might also be shocked by the nature of the love demonstrated by the father. The love he shows is big enough and strong enough to give his son the freedom to reject that very love.

What might also strike us as shocking is that the father doesn't act like a father – certainly not in the context of the culture at the time. He doesn't act like an earthly father should! But then... shockingly...that is the point... isn't it? That God, our Father, is simply put, not like us. He is, rather selflessly loving!

Truth is, up to this point, the whole story is a shock. By now the younger son should be on a one way ticket out of the family home. He has brought utter disgrace on the family and to the family name. He has brought great and possibly irreparable damage on the family's honour. The damage to that honour would mean he would never be 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.

There is though, yet another shock, but one that you can't read.....because it's what the story doesn't say. There is a shocking, stunning silence. Silence can be very powerful.

Not that I watch it, but why do they leave such long silences before announcing the next act to be voted out on things like X Factor? The silence builds the drama! As the saying goes: Silence really does sometimes speak louder than words.

What is not said in this story 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 his 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 was called for. Negotiations would go through a third party so both aggrieved parties could save face, and in this story it should be done by the older brother, because in Near Eastern culture it was his responsibility. This is still true today – it is a big brother who would act as peacemaker. But here, as his younger brother is about to set out on a path that

is likely to lead to disaster for all involved, he does nothing! There is a stunning silence.

Who is the elder brother in the story? The question this story poses is simply this: who will go out in search of the younger son? In the story it's clear the older brother has no intention of going in search of his brother who is lost. So...who is the elder brother in this story? Maybe this story simply points out that, like the elder brother in the story, the Pharisees have absolutely no intention of going in search of those who are lost.

Or maybe this story is far, far deeper than that, and there is something else far more profound at work here. Because, shockingly, for those who have eyes to see, there is an elder brother in this story...there is one who goes in search of the lost...and maybe he's there, standing in front of them as the story unfolds. And that would be utterly and deeply shocking.

² The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned

⁶ For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9 v 2,6,7.)

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all

things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.
⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.
⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.
⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.
¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—
¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1 v 1-14)

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2 v 6-11)

For those who have eyes to see, the shocking truth of the story is that the true elder brother is standing right in front of them.

What they are invited to see is that Jesus himself left His Father's house at his own expense.

What they are invited to see is that Jesus himself went in search of those who are lost.

What they will come to witness is that Jesus himself paid the price – he gave everything – to restore the inheritance for those who were lost.

What we are invited to see is that Jesus himself gave himself to restore our inheritance as sons and daughters of the Father.

What this story shockingly but beautifully and powerfully tells us, is that Jesus himself is the real older brother!

You want a reason to celebrate this thing we call Christmas? I think you might have it right there: the birth of your real elder brother! And what was it that the elder brother was there to do? It was, of course, to bring the sons and daughters back to the Father! That's the real point of this story, and that's the real point of Christmas.

When the younger son returns to his father, there is yet another shock for those listening. The question in the minds of the hearers is: how on earth is his father going to respond to the son who has now blown it completely? Not only has he brought great dishonour to his family's name...but he's now lost everything his father gave him. It really couldn't be any worse.

The son wants to come back as a hired man. He wants to swap one fear based belief (that of a hedonistic life) for another (that of saved legalism). Some of us are, in truth, in the place this son was: he came back thinking he would have to earn his father's love. The father, though, in a shocking twist of events, has a totally different response than his son is expecting. He runs to meet his son while he is still a long way off, and kisses him even before he is able to repent. His son never gets to give his prepared speech first!

That's absolutely shocking! The father welcomes his son home before he ever gets to say he's sorry! It's his father's kiss and embrace that initiates repentance.

Here's a shocking truth friends, our sin does not take God by surprise. And our elder brother died for all our sins, past, present and future. The father's response changed it for his returning son and it changes it for us too! At least it does for those who have the eyes to see who is standing right in front of them!

The shocking truth of this story is that Love Wins!

It may well be that by now you are wondering why I'm speaking on this story today – at the end of a series on our values and approaching Christmas. For me it's quite simple, this is a story about a Gospel God! This is a story about those who are lost and found. This is a story about the real elder brother, the one who goes in search of those who are lost. This is a story about the father who loves because he loves because he loves and is always ready to welcome his children home.

As his children we should take on the family likeness. A Gospel God, so a Gospel people.

Henri Nouwen in his book on this story, says the challenge of this story is for us not to remain like either the younger or elder son, but to become the Father. He writes: "No father or mother ever became father or mother without having been son or daughter, but every son and daughter has to consciously choose to step beyond their childhood and become fathers and mothers to others."¹

A Gospel people – how are you doing?

Geoff Lucas, writing about this story suggests that the father figure most likely represents Jesus! "He who has seen me, has seen the Father!" If we are to become like the father, then we are to become like Jesus. If we are to become like Jesus, then we will do the things that Jesus does, and that maybe includes becoming like the real elder brother and going in search of those who are lost! The powerful and shocking truth is that there are no wrong kinds of people, only people Jesus was willing to die for because he loves them.

So how are you doing?

Seems to me if we're a Gospel people, we'll do what Jesus did. If we're a Gospel people we'll become like the father.

So how are you doing?

So as we approach the Good News that is the Gospel of Christmas, will you let the Father who loves you fully embrace you in His love? Will you seek to grow

1. Nouwen, Henri, *"The return of the prodigal son,"* DLT 1994 page 121

to become more your Father's child? That's what a Gospel God longs to see in a Gospel people.

Amen

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 7th December 2014, by Rev. Ian Phillips.