

## 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Imagine for a moment you have a really good reputation in the town and community.

You are known as upright and moral. You always do the right thing. It's your photo in the paper handing out food parcels to farmers doing it tough. People know they can count on you. Yes, you're known as a God-botherer – but that's OK – you obviously take it seriously. You're in church most Sundays. You say the liturgy word perfectly. Everyone knows you give 1/10<sup>th</sup> of your income to the church.

You're a trusted member of the community and the church.

You are known as a person of your word, dutiful and respectful. You look like you've got your life together and you're pretty happy with what you've done.

Then you hear and see something that really throws you.

People are talking about the guy everyone knows as the town drunk.

You remember him from school when he was the kid who was always getting into trouble. And everyone knows his life has been a downward slide into the gutter. He's always been a loser, well-known to the police.

What really disturbs you is that this man seems to have got religion. He claims to have got serious about Jesus. He says that God has forgiven him and is changing him.

He says he heard that God knows all about every sin he has ever committed – even the one's he's forgotten about. And yet has forgiven him all of them – every last awful one.

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That he no longer fears God because God has done this most amazing thing.

You think – “that’s easy to say”.

Then you hear stories about how he’s telling everyone he used to drink with that they too can be forgiven and changed by God – just like him. And it cost him nothing. He didn’t have to clean up his life – he couldn’t. He didn’t have to stop getting drunk, stop bashing his wife and kids, stop yelling abuse and wanting to fight anyone who tried to help him. (He has started working on all these things now).

But he is saying he didn’t have to get his life in order before God would forgive him. He didn’t have to tidy everything up and start living rightly before God would accept him.

No! It wasn’t like that at all.

He tells everyone he couldn’t change himself, he just had to throw himself on God’s mercy.

And what did he find?

He did NOT find God saying: “come back when you’ve cleaned your life up.”

He did not find God saying: “too late, buddy; you had your chance many times before, but you’ve done some of those rotten things so often there’s no hope.”

NO!

Listen to what he found:

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Someone shared with him the story in Luke's gospel chapter 15 –the one we heard last week:

*The son 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.*

*“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son’.”*

The lost son – found.

The lost drunk – found.

The father's reaction to his son is NOT: “change your ways, my boy, and then I'll believe it.”

OR: “Where's my money?”

NO!

His reaction is: “let's party!” “He's home!” “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and now is found”. “Break out the champagne”.

And there's joy all round – the father because his son has come home; the son because he knew all – ALL had been forgiven.

Fast forward to today.

As you hear about the drunk and what's happened you are disgusted. That's not too strong a word.

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“How can God be interested in such a derelict?” you think to yourself.

“It’s a travesty of justice, it’s grossly unfair. I’ve done everything right – and this guy’s done everything wrong. And yet he claims to be absolutely sure God has forgiven him – and forgiven him everything – the wasted life, the hurt to other people. He never bothered with God before. He never so much as darkened the door of this church except for his Mum’s funeral.

And now look at him. Saying that he didn’t do anything to deserve God’s love. It’s free, he says.

“What about me?” you think. “I’ve always done the right thing – does that mean nothing?”

And then you feel a hand on your shoulder and hear a sweet, soft voice, saying:

*‘My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.’*

In this story from the lips of the Lord Jesus, it’s easy to forget it’s about two lost boys.

The spectacular fall of the younger one grabs our heart strings because we see the grace of God clearly at work. The father’s love is gracious. It doesn’t demand the boy do anything before the stunning welcome and outpouring of the father’s love.

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Yes, he will change – but he sees and hears the gospel of Jesus in his father's actions.

A gospel which says – welcome home! I love you! All is forgiven! All! I love you in spite of what you've done. Let's celebrate!

(We know that this is only possible because God in the person of his own son has borne all the consequences of the sins of the whole world in his own body by his death on the cross. There's nothing for us to do. Forgiveness cost God his Son. But it costs us nothing. And we know, as the Communion reminds us, that this was done once and for all, and nothing can be or has to be added to it.)

But the second son, the older boy, proves he is just as lost as his wayward young brother.

The heart of the good-living, widely-respected person I am suggesting we imagine ourselves to be makes me sad.

Despite every day experiencing his father's love and generosity – after all he is sole heir because he has lived an obedient life – he doesn't have a clue.

He cannot see that the love of his father for him and even for his wayward brother is not a matter of rules, regulations obedience and good deeds.

He cannot understand that "all - all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans chapter 3).

And that:

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“it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us”.

(Romans chapter 5.)

It's so easy to be like the older brother.

Friends, God's forgiveness is free – not earned.

God's Mercy is unconditional - not just for those who think they come up to scratch.

Let's be warned by the older brother.

God delights to forgive.

Imagine you are the upright person one last time.

On hearing of the town drunk's conversion, if you really understood God and his love, you wouldn't be crying foul. You wouldn't be saying it's unfair of God to let him get away with so much.

No, you would be booking the parish hall for a big party. Because you would be thrilled to see God's grace at work in yet another life.

Let's make sure our thinking is lined up with His.