

Sunday 8th November 2015 — Christ Church 6.30 pm
Stories of Salvation. 5. The Other Lost son — Luke 15:11-32

For the last few weeks we've been following through one of the best known chapters in the Bible — Luke 15. It is well known because of the 3 parables — the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son. But it doesn't just give us 3 good stories — it helps us to understand something about one of the great themes in the Bible — salvation.

We started with the Lost Sheep — where the shepherd leaves everything to go and search for his lost sheep. It reminds us that salvation begins with God — he is the one who has taken the initiative in rescuing sinners who mostly don't even realise that they are lost. It reminds us that salvation really is God's heartbeat, his passion. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents — so if we want to be bringing joy to God, we need to be doing whatever we can to help others repent and turn to him.

Then, the Lost Coin has a similar emphasis. The coin is lost in the dark and the dust, which is actually the state of everyone without Jesus. But Jesus came as the light, in order to rescue us.

The third parable starts with the Father, who welcomed back his wayward son, even though he had abused his father, and effectively wished that his father was dead.

And there were no conditions put on his return — not only was he welcomed back freely, but he was clothed with the father's own robe and ring. Because when we turn back to God, then not only are we forgiven and accepted, we are clothed with Jesus' righteousness. We don't have to do anything to deserve it, we can't do anything to deserve it. It is grace — outrageous grace.

Then last week we looked at the Lost Son, which reminded us that salvation is about people who have forfeited their right to be sons of God being welcomed back as sons through the Father's astonishing love.

But there is one last character we need to think about. Let's listen again to the third of Jesus' stories of salvation in Luke 15.

READING

Some of you will know that my mum has got Alzheimer's disease. And I think the hardest thing about that is that while mum's memory is getting worse and worse, she is completely oblivious to it. In fact, when I was down at hers last week, she told me that she is thankful that there is nothing wrong with her memory!

Well, in the same sort of way, I think the elder brother here would have said that compared to his younger brother, he was thankful that there was nothing wrong with his soul.

Because he really was a good son. Look at what he says to his dad: *All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.* Luke 15:29. Isn't that what most of us would like from our children – hardworking and obedient. This is a model son.

And, when people read this parable, he is often the forgotten son. For most people the emphasis is on the younger son, who goes away and then is welcomed back. That is the story of salvation here. And, of course, we are encouraged to think that way by the heading in our NIV bibles – this is the parable of the lost son.

But actually, I think that the whole of Luke 15 has been working up to the ending of this parable, and to the elder son. If we go back to the start of the chapter, this is how Luke begins.

READ 15:1-2

We saw last week that the tax collectors and sinners were the younger son in the story, so the Pharisees and teachers of the law are the elder son. They were the ones who were moaning about Jesus welcoming sinners, and it was because of that that Jesus told these parables. The whole point is the elder son.

As soon as he comes on the scene – he is a right grumpy old man, or grumpy young man. He is so different to his younger brother. But actually, he isn't that different. Both of the sons were basically interested in themselves; they wanted the father's goods but not the father himself.

The younger son showed his lack of love for his father by demanding his share of the family estate – effectively saying he wished his father was dead. The elder son did it by talking of 'slaving' for his father – working for him because he had to, not because he wanted to. A slave works out of fear, not out of joy and love. Both sons were actually equally alienated from their father.

That must have come as a huge shock to the Pharisees listening to Jesus. I think they would have seen themselves in the older son – he said that he had never disobeyed his father, and they made it their aim to never disobey God. The Pharisees studied God's word in great depth, and they had calculated that the law contained 248 commandments of things that must be done, and 365 commandments of things that mustn't be done. And the Pharisees aimed to keep all 613 of those commandments.

But it is quite possible, in theory at least, to do all that, and still not to love God. That was the elder brother. It is quite shocking really. It is quite possible to be alienated from God because of your goodness.

You see, sin is not just breaking the rules, but putting yourself in the place of God.

Tim Keller puts it like this: 'If, like the elder brother, you believe that God ought to bless you and help you because you have worked so hard to obey him and be a good person, then Jesus may be your helper, your example, even your inspiration, but he is not your Saviour. You are serving as your own Saviour.' (p.38)

There are plenty of elder sons in Moreton today. All those people who think that they are accepted by God because they live good, moral lives. And like the Pharisees, they miss out on God's amazing grace, because they don't believe that they need God's grace.

Good people are actually the hardest to evangelise, they are the most resistant to the good news. Because they don't see that they have anything to be saved from. It is tragic that so many people will fail to go to heaven because they assumed they were going to heaven. But to become a Christian involves repenting of the things we do wrong, but also repenting of the reasons we ever did anything right.

There are plenty of elder sons in Moreton today. But sadly, it is quite possible to find elder sons within the church. There are many genuine Christians who are elder brother-ish.

There are Christians who see obedience to God as a duty – a grim duty that they have to carry out. Often it didn't start out that way. They start out like the younger son – they realise that their life is a mess; that they are lost.

And in their lostness they turn to Jesus, and find that he has actually come to rescue them. And .. it is wonderful. They are filled with joy and peace. And they want to please God, because they love him.

But time passes. And that delight in knowing God, that wonder at being saved, it starts to dim a bit. And with it, the desire to please God changes. They still aim to do what God wants, but instead of that being because they love God and want to please him, it is because they fear that if they sin, God won't bless them. And gradually obedience becomes a chore. Maybe in their heart of hearts, they would like to do some of the things the Bible tells them not to, but they daren't, because God might get angry. *Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.* That could well be their prayer.

Maybe you can recognise a bit of yourself in that. It is so sad when that happens. Elder brothers lose the joy that being children of the Father should bring.

But there is another way in which Christians can be elder brothers. It is brought out by the big difference between this third parable and the previous two. When the sheep was lost, the shepherd went out to look for it.

When the coin was lost, the woman searched for it. When the younger son was lost No-one went to look for him.

But actually that is just what the elder son should have done. He had an obligation to care for the younger members of his family, even if they had got into a mess through their own stupidity and sin. It hooks back into something very early in the Bible – 2 brothers, Cain and Abel. And Cain says: *Am I my brother's keeper?* To which the answer has to be 'yes'.

The elder son should have gone and looked for his lost brother. He should have done it because he loved his brother, but even if that wasn't the case, he should have done it because he loved his father, and knew how sad his father must be because of the disappearance of his younger son. But the elder son did nothing. In fact, when the younger son did come back, his brother turned on his father for welcoming him.

That was just what the Pharisees were like. They should have been the ones getting out there, caring for the lost – the tax collectors and sinners. They should have been telling them about God's love, urging them to come home. They should have been rejoicing when Jesus did just that, and when in response sinners did turn back to the Father. But instead they cut themselves off, and wanted nothing to do with sinners.

And that is where this parable becomes decidedly uncomfortable, not just for Pharisees, but for us. Moreton is full of younger brothers – people who have no real interest in God, people whose lifestyles are so different from what the Bible lays down. People who, whether they realise it or not, need an elder brother to go and find them and bring them back to the Father's home.

Who can do that? I'm afraid it has to be me and you. If you are a Christian – if you have been welcomed back into the Father's home, then you have a responsibility to be going out there to bring back your younger brother.

It is easier to be like the elder brother in the story. To keep sinners at arms-length – to avoid the places they go to, to never mix with them. But that is not what God has called you to do. He's called you to be a true elder brother, even if it means getting your hands dirty, and mixing with people you would quite frankly not mix with. Building friendships with your neighbours for the sake of the gospel.

This last story of salvation does give us the other side of all the wonderful things we've learned over the past few weeks. Because it warns us that it is all too easy to be the elder brother.

It is all too easy to be alienated from God by your own goodness. And if you have never admitted your need of Jesus as your Saviour, that is where you are.

It is all too easy, even when you have been saved, to harden, and to end up doing what God wants out of duty and fear rather than out of love and joy.

It is all too easy to just not care about those living around you who are lost.

This last parable is left so open ended. We never find out whether the elder son does come into the feast, enjoy his father's love, and be reconciled with his brother. And maybe Jesus did that deliberately. Because you will have to decide what the ending is for you.