**31st March 2019**

**Mothering Sunday**

**Luke 15.1-3, 11-32;**

The relationship between any mother and her children is always complex. With recent parent teacher evenings, I was reminded of the boy who said ‘I wouldn’t say my mother was ashamed of me, but she used to go to parent’s evenings under an assumed name.

A salesman rings on the doorbell of a house. The door is answered by a teenage boy smoking a cigarette, with a tin of beer in one hand and a copy of Playboy tucked under his arm. The salesman says, ‘Is your mother at home?’ The boy said, ‘what do you think?’

The parable of the Prodigal Son is about a son who goes off the rails. There is no mention of a mother although some suggest that the father in the story behaves more like a mother. On this Mothering Sunday I want to use the parable to reflect on its many themes and how it may touch our lives – as parents, as children, as siblings, as people who may feel lost or who may feel under appreciated.

Jesus' well-known parable in this passage from the Gospel of Luke is commonly called "The Prodigal Son," when it might better be named after "The Prodigal Father," if "prodigal" really means according to the Oxford dictionary ‘recklessly wasteful, lavish’. Yes, the son wastes his inheritance on a good time in a distant land, but his father seems just as free and even wasteful in lavishing his wealth and forgiveness on a son who comes home arguably not in sincere repentance but calculated self-interest. This is Prodigal love and forgiveness – lavish and recklessly wasteful.

Throughout Lent we have been following the theme of walking the Way of Jesus – reflecting on what it means for discipleship – to follow Jesus. Our two-minute testimonies have allowed some people to share their challenges of being a Christian in the workplace and we have had some honest and insightful reflections.

Before I became a minister, I had a number of jobs, one of which was to work as a social worker (Social work assistant to be correct) for Nottingham Social Services. One of my tasks was to manage an elderly person day centre twice a week. About twenty older people were bussed in to a church hall where me and another assistant would look after them, facilitate their interaction and participation in social activities and serve up lunch.

It was the second day in my first week when disaster struck. I was busy and distracted getting the lunch ready after I’d called the older people to come to the table. I had my mind of the food not on the people in my care. One of the old ladies toppled over. Bang – straight on the floor. There she lay in very public pain. We had to phone an ambulance – she was taken to hospital where it was found she had broken her hip.

All of this made me feel terrible. I went to see her relatives that same day and told them what had happened. I was called in my line manager the next morning to account for what had happened. I confessed to being distracted and making a mistake and waited anxiously for the verdict. Bear in mind I was still on probation: my fledging career was held in the balance. I got a reprieve and was sent back to the day centre.

I’d like to think that those elderly people never knew such attentive care after that as I was anxious not to make the same mistake again. I had been shown mercy and given a second chance.

I let that experience affect me at a deep level. It was a let off; it was redemption; it was forgiveness with a charge to change. So many times, in the gospels Jesus tells stories of grace, mercy and forgiveness and his strapline is: ‘you have been shown mercy - go and be merciful; you have been shown generosity, go and be generous’.

This parable too is a parable of forgiveness and mercy, meant to stir us inwardly about the whole issues of grace, and God’s grace towards us.

We are not told in any detail what the father in the parable said to the son who wanted to leave. In asking for his inheritance now, he was effectively saying to his father I wish you were dead, because I want my inheritance now. The father gave into his request and allowed him his own way.

We can speculate that the father in Jesus’ story doesn’t seem to want to cause unnecessary resentment and a block in his relationship to his son. Painful though it is, he allows his son to go his own way, even with his money. I’m sure it was breaking the father’s heart. Whatever he said to the son, he was able to leave the relationship open for his son to return.

How we talk to each other is so important. I read a list of ‘things you’ll never hear a mother say to her child’. Listen to some of these:

Don’t bother wearing a jacket – it’s quite warm out’

‘Let me smell that shirt. Yes, that’s good for another week’.

‘I think that an untidy bedroom is a sign of creativity’

‘Yes, I used to play truant’

‘No, I don’t have a tissue on me – just use your sleeve’

And my personal favourite:

‘just turn your underpants inside out. No one will ever know.’

You wouldn’t hear a ‘good’ mother saying these things. Are there perhaps other more serious things that a good mother would not say to her children?

I know that when people make absolute demands or give absolute ultimatums, they can back themselves into a corner and not allow any room for compromise or negotiation or crucially for reconciliation.

I heard a story a while back about a mother and son who lived in a village. The son was in his early twenties and had been brought up since he was two years old by his mother after his father had left home.

The son was seeing a girl who his mother didn’t approve of and she let him know. The son continued to see this girl then one day announced he was going to move to the city, take up a new job and move in with his girlfriend. His mother was horrified, and they got into a verbal slanging match.

Things were said on either side, as years of bitterness and resentment poured out. The mother said how much she had cared for him and sacrificed for him, especially after her husband had left her. Her son was being self-centred and disrespectful. Just like his father.

Her son told her she wasn’t a good mother and no wonder his father had left her when he was younger. The argument ended with an ultimatum from the mother that if her son walked out on her he would never be welcomed back.

The son walked out.

The mother was heartbroken. She cried bitterly for weeks. She desperately wanted her son back. Yet he made no contact. She wrote him many letters asking his forgiveness and pleading for him to get in touch. She realised she was being unreasonable, and he had his life to lead. She passed these letters on through a friend of his son. Still no word.

Every night she would put a light on in his bedroom. She wanted it to be a sign of welcome. Whenever he chose to return, his room was ready. She did this every night for the next fifteen years. The light shone from his bedroom. It shone out in the village. There was a welcome ready. But it was never taken up. The mother died of a broken heart and her son never returned home.

Should she have just got on with her life and accepted that mistakes had been made. Was she stupid to keep putting on the light every night, always prepared to welcome back her long-lost son?

Whatever the father in the parable said to his son, as he headed off to the far country with his inheritance to squander on wild living, the father must’ve made sure that there was always an open invitation for the son to return and for reconciliation to be made.

Watch your words. Leave the light on.

The son in the parable leaves home but after he has squandered his inheritance and falls on hard times he comes to his senses and realises that he still has a home to go back to.

Perhaps we can think of times in our lives when we have come to our senses, or we can think of others who have come to their senses, or perhaps we know of certain people who we hope will one day come to their senses! Life!

When the son returns in the parable of the Prodigal Son, we are told that while he was still a long way off his father saw him, he was filled with compassion, literally his heart went out to him first before the father actually ran to meet him and flung his arms around him and kissed him. Again speculation, but it implies that the father was constantly watching and waiting for a chance that his son would return.

The prodigal returns in the parable of Jesus and is welcomed, hugged and kissed by the father. The father is so overjoyed. He had feared the worst that his young son might be dead! But here he is alive and well and home, safe and sound. The father is so happy that he calls for a great celebration.

But when the elder brother hears of it. He is hurt, jealous, confused, resentful and angry. He feels sorry for himself, but more than that and worse, he feels that the father has rejected him!

Of course, we know better! We know that the father has not rejected him at all. He wasn't being rejected, but he thought he was. Sometimes we "feel" rejected when we really aren't being rejected. Maybe the father could have told his older son more often that he was deeply loved. We all need to hear words of affirmation.

My father never said he loved me. I knew he did by his actions, but rarely ever from his lips. He was of that generation and class that didn’t do emotions – they were a sign of weakness and you had to survive tough times, war and rationing – stiff upper lip and packing up those troubles in the old kit bag and smile smile smile.

Scholars suggest it is the party itself that angers the older brother. Both Judaism and Christianity provide for the return of sinners, but to bread and water, not fatted calf; to sackcloth, not a new robe; to ashes, not jewellery; to kneeling, not dancing; to tears, not merriment"

This is a story of sibling rivalry - the older brother's anger evoking "the child's first ethical statement, 'It's not fair'. Perhaps you’re an older child who has seen the younger ones getting away with so much more than you did?

Are there people who do not "deserve" forgiveness quite so easily? What about people whose behaviours have been destructive of others? This parable, this command, of Jesus to forgive and then we will be forgiven – is so deeply troubling and radical.

Are both sons lost to the father: one "to a life of recklessness," and the other "to a more serious fate, to a life of angry self-righteousness and unforgiveness that takes him so far away from his father that he might as well be feeding pigs in a far country. The parable challenges us to reflect on how our unforgiveness may block us receiving the love, especially the love of God.

The inference is that God is like the father in the parable, giving his son freedom to do his own thing, but watching every day, to see whether he’s coming back. And when he sees his son on the road, rushes out to meet him, full of joy and welcome. He doesn’t even wait for his son to say sorry, he organises a party.

Barbara Bradford Taylor says the father "does not love either of his sons according to what they deserve. Both are selfish in their own ways. He just loves them, more because of who he is than because of who they are."  "It is up to each one of us to decide whether we will stand outside, like the eldest son, all alone being right, or give up our rights and go inside and take our place at a table full of reckless and righteous saints and scoundrels, brothers and sisters united only by our relationship to one loving father, who refuses to give us the love we deserve but cannot be prevented from giving us the love we need"

As we move towards Easter, we will be reminded of the Christian message. Jesus came to us, God made flesh, to remind us this is not an impersonal universe, much as it is fashionable these days to dis-believe God created all things and is behind all things. People say to me ‘prove to me God exists?’ I say I can’t prove it nor can you disprove it – but when I look out from a mountain top and see this wonderful world I can’t believe that we are here by chance, that all that I am is just a collection of atoms and my thoughts, feelings are just chemical activity in the brain; that love is just a delusion, that any sense of what is right and wrong, the depths of my conscience, is just social conditioning. When I stand by the bedside of a dying person my hearts yearns that this is not it, not the last word.

Deep down I know that there is a God calling out through the universe to be connected to me. And at Easter we remind ourselves that Jesus came to reconnect us – to bring us back home – to a home that is welcoming, to a God who has words of welcome, words of love and forgiveness, to a God who stands with arms open wide, a God who has left the light on, who is watching, waiting for us and who runs to meet us at the first sign of us turning up.

Tim Keller a Presbyterian minister in New York says that many Christians in his congregation are Asian and feel quite pressured by parental expectations to achieve and succeed. They often feel they are failing their parents. However, many young Anglo professionals in his church have grown up in a much more individualistic culture and in many ways struggle with anger and bitterness towards parents they feel have let them down and failed them. Live in Asia and your kids feel they have failed you as parents. Live in the West and your kids feel like you have failed them!

Keller says how does he address these people as their pastor. He reminds them of the only parental love you can’t lose, and the only parental love you must have is grounded in the ultimate heavenly father who secured us through the saving work of Jesus Christ. Even though he was God’s Son, he was cast out and lost, so that we could be brought into the family of God. When you realize that he did that for you, the love of the heavenly Father becomes the most precious and real thing to you.

When that happens, if you are bitter because you didn’t get your parents love, you can afford to forgive them, because they haven’t impoverished you; you are rich in parental love. And those of you feeling like failures before your parents’ expectations can relax, because you have the approval of the only parent whose opinion counts.

You may say ‘Simon I never got a break in life. I never had a line manager who gave me a reprieve, who gave me another chance. I haven’t known much grace and mercy’.

I can only say I’m really sorry for you. That is really sad. But God gives you another chance. God offers grace and mercy – let that count, let that change you. I don’t want you to try harder – I want you to go deeper – go deeper into the salvation and grace that Jesus Christ offers to you.

The light is always on. The compassion is always there. The arms are always wide to welcome and embrace. What is lost can be found.

Bibliography: Tim Keller, Preaching, Hodder 2015

Barbara Bradford Taylor's sermon, "The Prodigal Father," is in *The Preaching Life*).