

The sinner and the sinned against

Jesus had been spending far too much time hanging out with the riff-raff. He'd been sitting down far too often at the tables of the undesirables, associating with what Hilary Clinton might have called 'the deplorables'. And the good, upright, squeaky clean Pharisees and scribes are grumbling. How can this possibly be God's man when he muddies himself with this kind of company? I have a song-writer friend who has a verse in one of his songs which sums up these religious diehards beautifully. It goes,

‘The stiff holy people cruised round in big ships
With sin-seeking missiles sticking out from their lips.’

Yes, these are the stiff holy God-botherers who cruise around with their sin-seeking missiles on search and destroy missions, always quick to judge and to condemn and to exclude. And it's in response to their grumbling that Jesus tells this story, one of his very best known and a little mini-masterpiece. It tells of a young, headstrong man who resolves to request his family inheritance from his father. And his father accedes to his request and off the young man goes: off to a far country and a hedonistic life of pleasure and indulgence - until the money runs out and famine strikes and he finds himself alone, his only friends the pigs who he feeds. But faced with this predicament the young man resolves to return, to come home, and off he sets. While he is still far off, however, there comes running towards him the figure of his father, arms wide open to embrace him and to welcome him home. And then there is a party and a feast, and a robe and a ring for what was lost is now found.

But then there is the other figure in the story – the older brother. He is out in the fields where he has been faithfully working ever since his brother's departure and he hears the music and the noise of the party and inquires what's going on and he is appalled. He's angry and he refuses to join the celebration though his father implores him, and he sulks. 'All these years I've worked here and you've never thrown a party for me and now this waster returns and you throw one from him and I'm expected to join in!' And his father pleads with him, and we don't hear if he relented and joined the party, but we do know that the stiff, holy Pharisees and scribes never did decommission their sin-seeking missiles. They resisted Jesus until the end.

So there are three characters in this story – a father, a younger brother and an older brother, and I want this morning to look at each of them in turn and to consider what they represent and how we might see ourselves in them. So let's begin with the younger son and I guess that we could label him 'the sinner' in this story. He represents the low-lives that Jesus has been hanging around with, the disreputable company that Jesus has been keeping. And this younger son is the classic image of the sinner as he turns away from God and suffers the dire consequences. And many Christian's testimonies have taken this younger son's story as a kind of template for conversion to Christ, with tales of how they became mired in sin and wallowed in the gutter before turning round to glorious salvation! In fact I used to feel somewhat disappointed that I didn't have a conversion story like that - my life has been pretty dull by comparison. And you could argue that this story of the lost son has contributed to a rather unhealthy preoccupation with sin that has characterized some forms of Christianity. While we all admit that no-one is perfect many decent, honest people find it hard to see themselves in this young scoundrel who is so beset by the sins of selfishness and greed and lust. And the way the Gospel is presented sometimes makes us feel forced to profess a level of personal sinfulness that we don't really feel. We might say, 'I'm a miserable sinner!' but in our heart of hearts we might not really feel that, if we're honest.

The Bible, however, doesn't always portray sin in terms of debauchery and excess as in this parable. Sin is described as 'missing the mark', as 'falling short', as being so much less than what we have been created to be and could be. And if we are honest, and if we know ourselves well, we will recognise that there is in each us that which merits Paul's conclusion in the Book of Romans: 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.'

But of course sin is complex. For a start there are sins of omission as well as sins of commission – not just selfish things that we do, but loving and selfless things that we fail to do, that pass us by. It's not just what you do, but also what you don't do! And there are also what we might call 'structural sins' – wrongdoing that we are caught up in and complicit in. So I am part of an unjust and distorted world where systems are sinful and stacked against the poor and the vulnerable and I sometimes unknowingly collude with these. I am not certain that all my savings are banked ethically and whether they contribute to an unjust world. I spoke last week of the food industry and the way our eating habits are so destructive, but we are caught up in this and it's so hard to

come out. It's so hard to disinvest in Egypt! It's hard to disentangle from Babylon! We are trapped in their webs! So there is the sin I do, and there is the good that I fail to do and there is the wrong that I collude with and it's all part and parcel of a fallen world. And as sinners we need forgiveness.

So that is the first figure in the story – the sinner, the younger brother. But then there is too the one who is sinned against, the father. He is the one who has been deeply hurt – his son spurning him, more interested in money than in him. It's been pointed out, in fact, that what the younger son asks for here, his inheritance, could not legally be given until his father was dead. And therefore for the younger son to demand this was tantamount to saying to his father, 'I wish you were dead!'

So the father is sinned against. And of course he represents God in the story for all our sin is sin against God, and God is wounded and pierced by our sins as we see on the cross of Calvary. God suffers from our sins. But the father in the story also represents all those who are sinned against: all who are hurt either by our inhumanity to one another, or who are hurt by the structural sins of a distorted and disordered world. And so often those who sin greatly have also been greatly sinned against and are in need of healing as much as forgiveness. You may have heard of this terrible documentary that has come out recently about Michael Jackson, 'Leaving Neverland', and the accusations of serial child abuse that have been directed against him. But it's no surprise to read about Jackson's violent childhood, and his abusive father and the damage done to him. What's the connection? Is there one at all? Or there is the recent case of Shemima Begum who left the UK at the age of 15 to fight for ISIS in Syria and who wanted to return to the UK with her baby – like the younger son she has hit rock bottom and wants to come home. And it's so easy to say, 'you made your choice and now you pay for it!' 'You made your bed and now you must lie in it, and besides, you haven't shown sufficient remorse!' But do we know how much Shemima Begum has been sinned against, groomed and enticed and sucked into this horror? And must we not ask the same questions about that young man who slaughtered 50 Muslims in a New Zealand mosque? What provokes such evil? And the tendency of the political right is to hold people accountable for their sins and crimes and the tendency of the political left is to blame society and its structures and to recognize how we are sinned against: 'bent out of shape by society's pliers' as Bob Dylan once put it. But it's a complex and difficult call to make, and at the very least we should always

be very wary of being judgmental of ‘sinners’ for we simply don’t know anyone else’s story well enough. Only God knows and only God can judge.

So we have the sinner and the sinned against. And the sinner needs forgiveness, and the sinned against need healing. But then, finally, there is the older brother in the story. And he, of course, is meant to be the villain of the piece: the righteous but self-righteous bystander. He is the real sinner, for like the Pharisees and the stiff holy people he cannot find it in his heart to rejoice that his brother has come home. In Jesus’ eyes such graceless people are worse than the younger sons of this world who they condemn. But, wait a minute - is not this older brother also sinned against? He, after all, has been abandoned and left to be the responsible one while his brother has ‘a good time’. And we are told that when he was approaching the house the older brother heard the sound of the party going on inside, the music and dancing. Had no-one invited him? Had his father not even told him he was throwing a party? And what about this brother’s complaint that in all his years of faithful service his father had never thrown a party for him. Was his father not guilty here of a sin of omission, against his son? And maybe this older brother’s anger and resentment were the product of never having felt really valued, really appreciated, really thanked. And so he is a blend – of the sinner and the sinned against. He is that curious mixture – in need of both forgiveness and healing.

And in him, perhaps we see ourselves most clearly. Justice demands that we recognize where we fall short, where we miss the mark, where we are guilty of sins against God and sins against one another – sins of commission, sins of omission, structural sins. All are guilty. And justice points her sword. But compassion demands that we also recognize where we are sinned against, where we carry wounds and scars. And compassion opens wide her arms.

God alone knows how these things play out in our hearts and in the hearts of others. But the good news is that God, the father in the story, is a God of both justice and compassion; a God of both forgiveness and of healing. And God knows us – far, far better than we know ourselves. And God loves us. Amen.

O gracious God,
Holy and eternal one,
Sovereign Creator and Lord of all,
we praise you, our provider and our protector,
who has given us life
and nurtured us with love
and in whom we find our eternal home.
And we praise you who have birthed us,
Made us your children and blessed us.
Forgive us we pray that we have spurned you love;
forgive us that we have set off for the far country,
squandered your grace and sought life apart for you.
And we come to you now,
tattered and torn
with the dirt of our sin upon us and we confess
our sins and our wrongdoings.
Lord have mercy.
And loving God we praise you for Jesus
In whom you have come to the far country
to retrieve us and to bring us back.
Reassure us we pray that you come to us,
meeting us with open arms,
and you wipe the dirt from us and make us clean;
and you prepare a robe in place of our rags
and place a ring upon our finger
and prepare a feast for us,
for such is your grace.
May it transform our lives we pray,
As we join together in the words Jesus taught us, saying...