

Lent 4
6/3/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

God's gift economy

Listen once more to the words of the younger son as when he finally hits rock bottom:

'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."'

The prodigal son seeks to relate to his father in what we might call an "economy of exchange". The economy of exchange is the way in which most of our relationships to each other are constructed – particularly those relationships outside of our immediate family circle. In an economy of exchange we advance by our capacity to trade – whether this is the exchange of goods or services or favours, or the exchange of money for those goods and services. My status or freedom within such an economy has to do with what I have to offer to others. If I have little to exchange, I am impoverished, my opportunities are limited; perhaps I cannot travel, or own my own home, or even be confident that I'll have food on my table tomorrow...

This way of relating to each other and advancing ourselves is very familiar to us – perhaps even "obvious". But also apparently obvious is the idea that this is the way that it *has* to be. Notice how quickly children become aware of the magic powers of money! They learn quickly that they can exchange this in order to get that. As a child we tend to miss that we are *given* the money which we trade for the toy or for lollies; we say thankyou but the exchange value of the coin looms far larger than the fact of the gift.

The economy of exchange quickly becomes for us a central part of how we relate to each other. In our story this morning, the younger son determines that, although he can no longer claim to be worthy of the freely-given love of his father, he can *exchange* his service for food and shelter. Of course, we know how the story unfolds: the father does not even wait for the contract to be proposed before he receives his son back with open arms, and we're well accustomed to speak here the father's "forgiveness" of his son.

It's very easy for us to *psychologise* what happens between the father and the son, such that we think about forgiveness as simply being a matter of a change of heart. But forgiveness – at least in its deepest Christian sense – is not simply about psychology, not simply about our minds. It's also about *ontology* – that is, it's about our very being, about our death and life. This is because Christian faith is not simply about being forgiven or forgiving; it's about resurrection from the dead.

And, in fact, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a parable of death and resurrection. In listening to the story, we usually miss the death which takes place. When the younger son says to his father "Give me my share of the inheritance", he is basically declaring, "I wish you were dead". And, at least culturally, the father *is* dead to the son, for the boy has received his inheritance – the fruits of his father's death. And, indicating that this dynamic also operates culturally the other way around, the father declares twice at the

end of the story, “he was dead but now is alive”. This is a metaphorical use of death, to be sure, but most death is metaphorical.

But notice the type of exchange which brings this new reality about. The son dares approach his father only as a potential servant, seeking to *exchange* his labour for food and shelter. The father, of course, does not have to accept his offer of service. In fact, the dead cannot trade; in the economy of exchange, the Prodigal has nothing. He lives again only because the father does not desire an *exchange*, but instead makes the *free gift* of welcome.

This brings us to the possibility of a different way of relating to each other – one which qualifies our necessary trades and exchanges with an economy of the gift. One does not really exchange a gift – it doesn’t really have a tradable value. And so true gift-giving is in fact a very difficult thing to do for we who are so accustomed to trade. Whenever you have received a gift from someone – especially at Christmas – and have felt embarrassed because you don’t have one for the person who gave the gift to you, you have in fact not received a gift but a trade surplus. If receiving a “gift” *requires* giving a gift, then you are really trading or exchanging. In the same way, if you’ve ever given a “gift” and expected a gift or a favour in return, again a gift has not really been given, only an expected exchange has taken place.

A gift is unwarranted, undeserved and presented without expectation of return. This very rarely happens; it is very hard to give or to receive a gift *as a gift*. The prodigal son does not expect the gift – he comes to trade.

And we ought not to forget that there’s another brother in the story. He appears also as a trader. He objects that his younger brother has not deserved their father’s favour, while he *has* deserved it and yet not received it. The two brothers behave very differently but in fact think very much alike about how they must relate to their father: the older brother imagines that he *is* like a servant who has worked very hard and deserves his reward, and the younger brother seeks to *become* such a servant.

But the father operates differently: not exchange and reward but *sheer gift* is the way by which he relates to his children. The younger son *cannot* earn his father’s favour, for the son is effectively dead to him. The older son imagines that he *has* earned his father’s favour when in fact all that is the father’s was already his as gift, and not to be earned at all.

We are the both the younger son, and the older. Gift-giving without thought of a return is not much in our nature. The tragic result of this is that the possibility of a different type of world will always seem beyond our reach. Relating to each other on the basis of mere exchange is the source of exacerbation of so many of the problems which ail us as individuals and as a society. If you’ve got it, then you can have it; if not, then bad luck. If you’re nasty to me, I’ll be nasty to you. I’ll only be nice to you if you’re nice to me. If you blow up my family, I’ll blow up your family.

When the church speaks of forgiveness it speaks of a “givingness” which is quite beyond a mere change of mind or heart. It is in fact a new way of being, a way of being which breaks the normal cycle of exchange with the possibilities of a gift. And so we use the symbol of resurrection, because this is also quite beyond our experience. To be forgiven – to receive a true gift – this is the same as to have life out of being dead, for the dead can do nothing for themselves and will only live again if one living calls them forth.

If we're honest, this type of talk ought to offend us all a little – believers and unbelievers alike, younger prodigal sons and older hard-working sons alike. But the offence has nothing to do with whether or not our science can account for the resurrection of Jesus; this is quite secondary. The unbelievable thing is that God should care about the dead – about those who have nothing to trade. While the older brother has always been cast as the “baddie” in the story, he is in fact the one who knows best the scandal of what Jesus says here. If you do find yourself one day raised to new life, it will have nothing to do with whether or not you *deserved* it. It will simply be a matter of God freely willing that you live again as his child, that having been lost you have been found, that having died now you live.

By contrast, we generally imagine that if we *were* to relate to God it would be on the basis of how well we did in our lives and so what we deserved from God. Believer or non-believer alike, we tend to think the whole God thing is about “being good”.

But *imagine*: the free gift of life, whether deserved or not – being made again the son or daughter of a loving parent to whom we have been dead and lost. It ought to offend us as well lift us up, for not only would we be forgiven the debts we owe (which is good for us!), but those who we think owe us would also be forgiven.

And imagine what the world might be like if we began to live *now* as that loving parent lives, living lives which do not calculate for a just balance in exchange but which actually seek to tip the scales in favour of someone else, that sins, trespasses, mistakes, debts might be forgiven and we might all have the possibility of starting afresh...
