*Some questions to help you lead a study on Luke 15vv11-32*

*Today we are going to look at one of the most famous, and much loved, stories Jesus ever told. Let’s pray that God uses this story to help us to understand his heart better, and then to reflect that heart in our lives, and in the mission of our Church.*

**Getting our bearings**

1. What 2 groups of people were tuning in to Jesus on this occasion (vv1 and 2)? Did you realise that Jesus had this very mixed audience as he told his story? We can expect Jesus to address **both** groups…
2. The parable of the lost son is actually the 3rd of 3 quite similar parables Jesus told in this Chapter. What has been the main point Jesus has been making in the first 2 parables (vv1-10)

*Now read vv11-32….*

**A story of two lost sons**

This parable is often known as the parable of the lost son or the parable son. But I hope we’ll see that it’s a tale of 2 sons, both lost, both extravagantly loved by God…

1. The younger son is perhaps the most famous of the two. How is he portrayed in v12? How is this attitude seen in the way human beings treat God? Do you recognise anything of yourself here?
2. This son starts by enjoying his new freedoms, but soon life sours. Does this ring true for you of what rebels against God tend to experience as they put more and more distance between themselves and God? Why do v15/16 represent ‘the pits’ for him?
3. The turning point comes in v17. What happens to this young man? What does he realise he needs to do, and what place in his Father’s home does he anticipate on his return? What does this teach us we need to pray for ‘lost sons’?
4. Why would the Father’s attitude in v20 surprise those listening to Jesus’ story? What does it teach us about God’s love for those who are spiritually lost and dead, and yet who return home to Him?
5. What do the robe, the ring and the feast all convey about what God delights to grant to sons and daughters who return to him?
6. How much sympathy do you have for the older brother (v25-31)? How close does this lad seem to his Father (28-30)? What does the Father want him to realise about his love for him and for ‘this brother of yours’(31-32)

**A message for 2 groups**

1. What does Jesus want the tax collectors and sinners to learn from the love the Father had for the wayward lost son?
2. What does Jesus want the Pharisees and teachers of the law to learn from the way the Father encourages the older son to go into the feast and celebrate?

**An application to us, and St Margaret’s Church from this story**

1. How much do you remain thrilled by the love of the Father for the younger son? What do the robe, ring and feast convey to you personally about your place in the Father’s home?
2. Have you ever felt like the older son, uninterested in people who have rejected God and whose lives have spiralled into more and more chaos? How do Jesus words to the older son act as a rebuke and challenge?
3. The combined message of the 3 parables in Luke 15 has been described in this way:- ‘*God loves the down and out, the up and out, and everyone in between! He searches for them, and delights when they come to their senses and return home to Him’.* How much is the Father’s heart for lost people reflected in your heart?
4. What can St Margaret’s learn from this famous story?

**Sermon for Gift Sunday**

I want us this morning to engage with perhaps the **most famous** story Jesus ever told.

It’s certainly always had a **special place** in my heart as it was the first story that stimulated me to think about God….

It’s a story with characters we can readily picture: –

* a wayward child, eager to find freedom, far away from home;
* a parent hurt by their kid’s behaviour, and yet eager for reconcilition;
* a dutiful older sibling, resentful at his brother’s selfishness.

We can perhaps recognise characters like these in our own family?!!

But **WHY** did Jesus tell it, and what might it mean for us personally, and as a Church?

Well, look up the story – Luke 15 (pxxxx) and will you notice some clues right at the start of the passage….

Jesus (image of Jesus) was talking to 2 very different sorts of people that day.

There were the ‘tax collectors and sinners’ - (Image of immoral woman) – people who knew that they’d turned away from God and his standards, and who wondered whether there was any way back!

Also there were the upright – the Pharisees (image of a Pharisee) and teachers of the law. These people were muttering to themselves in disbelief that Jesus – an apparently holy man- was hanging out with the low life in society.

I think we can expect that Jesus told this story to speak to both types of people- those who were sinners and knew it, and those who thought they were a cut above everyone else, and showed no concern, no sympathy for those with messy lives..

Let’s see what Jesus had to say to them, and has to say to us still today…

Let’s think first about the wayward son (image of a stroppy young man and his father). We see him ‘fronting up’ to his dad, and making a demand (‘I want my share now’). That demand would have shocked Jesus’ hearers, because they knew that people only got their share after a parent’s death. *‘I want you dead’* is what this young man was in effect saying!

His father would have been fully entitled to say **no** to this brash request. But he didn’t. He gave his son his share of the estate, and off the lad went to the bright lights in a country far, far away.

At first, everything went well, and the young man had a whale of a time. We can perhaps imagine wine, women and song- certainly his elder brother did! But soon the money ran out, an d so did the new-found friends and a famine reduced this lad to working at a piggery. (Image of man amongst pigs) This would have been ‘the pits’ for a Jewish lad- away from Israel, working amongst unclean animals, craving the pods the piggies were munching!

The turning point comes in v17 when ‘he came to his senses’. He realises what a mess he’s made of his life, and how much better he’d be off back home.

He knew he’d no right to be a son, but he reasoned that even a servant in his dad’s house was better off than him in the pig pen!

He realised he needed to go home, humbly confessing his sins, and pleading for a place in the servants’ hall.

His heart must have been ‘in his boots’ on this long trudge home- with no certainty how he’d be received by his Father.

Listen then to some of the most wonderful words in the Bible- v20:-

*‘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 round him and kissed him.’*

The father had never stopped loving his Son, and wanting him home, so he runs towards his lad, and hugs and kisses him (image of father kissing his son)

He doesn’t even let his son finish his confession, but rather insists that his servants get **clothes** that give him dignity, a **signet ring** that gives him security as a son rather than a slave, and a **lavish party** that speaks volumes as to the joy the Father felt.

~ Can’t we readily grasp what Jesus wanted to teach the tax collectors and sinners (image of immoral woman) that day? He wanted them to know the depth of God’s love for them (Image of red heart). If they will only come to their senses, turn from their many sins, and plead with God for mercy, they will be received as sons and daughters by God, clothed in robes of righteousness, with the ring of sonship on their fingers, and the sound of celebration in the ears.

~What brilliant news for all who realise that they’ve turned their backs on God, and wonder whether there’s any way back to Him… **Yes there is**, Jesus assures us, and this may be a very important message for some listening in to Jesus today. Over the last few months, you’ve begun to draw close to Jesus, listening to him, interested in him. That’s great, but don’t leave it there, come humbly but expectantly to God, ready to receive a rich welcome from him, reconciliation with him, and immense joy, as you begin to experience the salvation God has made possible for you.

But let’s think now about the older brother (Image of angry older brother with his father). It has been joked that he was the only person **less** glad than the fattened calf to see the younger brother’s return!!

I’m sure that many of us will feel some sympathy for him. After all, he’d had to cope with the extra work caused by his younger bro swanning off to sunnier climes with the family silver in his back pocket.

More than that, he doesn’t seem to have felt very close to his Father. He describes his work for him as ‘slavery’ and resents an apparent lack of thoughtfulness and generosity by his dad towards him. He’d been with his dad on the farm, but doesn’t seem to have felt close to HIm…

And now, he’s expected to rejoice because his ‘waste of space’ younger bro has returned home. ‘*No way, Jose’* is his perhaps understandable response!

Well, the Father **could** have forced this son to come into the feast.

But he doesn’t! As he was tender with the younger son, so is he with this older lad- going out to plead with him. (Image of older son with his Father) ‘You have always been with me and all I have is yours’ he assures him. But now is a time to celebrate- ‘Rejoice -this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, he was lost and now is found.’

Once again, it is easy to understand the message that Jesus wanted to convey to the upright Pharisees (image of Pharisee) who had been criticising him for mixing with sinners.

‘*Rather than looking down your noses at sinners’*, says Jesus, ‘*you should be like the Heavenly Father who cares for all he has made, who thinks that they are worth the most careful of searches, and who rejoices when sinners turn from their sin, and return humbly to God.’*

The older brother is designed to act as a rebuke, and challenge, to the religious people of Jesus’ day who showed by their harsh, unwelcoming attitude how far they were from the heart of God- the Father who had sent his only son down from Heaven to seek and save the lost.

Well let’s finish by thinking what this amazing story means for us still today?

Surely the main thing Jesus wants us to grasp is the **extraordinary love** God has for each person he has created. God loves us, reaches out to us, and wants us to come to our senses, and willingly choose to return to him, and receive his abundant grace. I hope that though you may know well know this already, it **still** thrills your heart….

The 2nd lesson flows naturally from the first. Because God loves all, he wants his Church to share **his** passion for people who are **spiritually lost**.

We’re not to treat the Church as a private club (image of grand building) , one that cares only for the interests of its members.

Rather we’re to see ourselves as a spiritual version of the RNLI (image of boat) , constantly thrusting out into the seas on a search and rescue mission – to help people in danger and bring them safely back to shore.

~ We’re to be like the mum whose daughter left home after a fierce row. She ended up living in a squat, and attended the seedier joints in Soho. Her mum spent many months going round **every** pub in that area and putting on the wall a photo of herself (image of woman) with the words ‘*Wherever you’ve been , whatever you’ve done, come home*.’ A year or so later, the daughter saw one of the photos and it prompted her to come home.

~ We’re to be like that mum, doing **all** that we can, to summon people who are lost – the ‘down and out’, the ‘up and out’ and everyone in between to come home to God….

Well, **how** are we doing in coming that sort of Church, one with a DNA of ‘search and rescue’

~Think about our buildings. Over the last 15 years , this Church and the Church Hall have been radically transformed to be better places to welcome lost people home, 7 days a week.

~ Think about our aims. Over the years we have simplified and sharpened them considerably so that now we see ourselves as having one overriding priority, that of ‘Sharing God’s love’

Or think about our staff. Last year, we made a huge decision to enhance our pastoral staff team to include the appointment of an Associate Vicar, tasked with helping our outreach to grow, so that we might better reach the hundreds of new homes in our village.

We rejoice in having a rector, AV, Curate and Under 18s worker, and a strengthened office team, **NOT** because staff are to do all the work of mission, leaving the Church family to applaud or criticise from the safety of the stadium! Rather we rejoice because **more staff** can equip the **whole church family** to take their part in the spread of the gospel. And we’ve seen that begun to happen this last year, with growth on Sundays, special events and weekly ministry…

Or lastly think of the culture we are praying to develop in our Church. We believe that it is developing strongly with us reaching out more intentionally, welcoming in more warmly, and building up one another in faith, love and hope.

Today is a day to **thank God** for the progress we’ve seen in the past years, but also to realise that there is more that the Lord Jesus wants to do in us and through us, to glorify God in 2025 and beyond

Listen to how the Apostle Paul challenged the Church as Corinth

‘Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord

Because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain’

This was a call not just to the leaders of the Church but to each member- to give ourselves not half-heartedly but fully to the work of the Lord, because this will echo in eternity, that’s why those who invest fully in this ministry will receive treasure in heaven.

* Practically, this will be seen in us volunteering to help in various ministries in the Church and in the community (Image of a raised hand)
* It will be seen in prayer (Image of a praying person) since conversion and growth can only really be brought about by God himself
* It will be seen in us being willing to invest part of our money (image of person giving money) so that the ministry of the Church can continue, deepen and lead to the extension of God’s kingdom

Let us pray for one another that the love of God, the power of his Spirit and the extension of his Kingdom might continue to motivate us in 2025 and beyond..