

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 30th March 2025, Lent 4

Readings: **Joshua 5:2-12**

2Corinthians 5:16-21

Psalm 32

Luke 15:11-32

I'd like to share a sad story that ends well and leaves us much to think about.

You see, there was a well-known Toowoomba family that had two sons. The eldest son was hard-working and well respected, while the youngest son was a much-loved larrikin. While away at university in Brisbane the larrikin preferred pubs and parties to lectures and libraries. Personal pleasure was the main-game, and he figured that the more money he had, the more satisfying life would be. One weekend while visiting his parents he stole their credit cards and flew to Sydney.

The parents were hurt but did not cancel the cards. They texted and called to see how he was going and ask what was wrong, but he never replied. On Facebook, and Instagram, the images of what was happening in Sydney were clear for all to see, and the oldest son felt ashamed of his brother's behaviour and of his parents' continuing indulgence.

The weeks turned to months and the credit cards maxed out so many times that the banks cancelled them. By that time the younger son had become addicted to anything that would give him a high and little by little those who supplied his drugs drew him deeper into debt. Eventually they drew him into activities that would have caused his grandmother an ocean of tears had she known about them.

The months turned to years, and the young man's mind and body became very unwell. Late one morning he woke up unwashed, in his own vomit, under a bridge. As he sat and blearily watched the cars drive by he remembered a time when he had been well enough to drive. He remembered when his hands did not constantly shake, and when he did not wonder where he would sleep at night.

Conscious that he had hurt many people, he wondered if his Dad would let him sleep at the back of his shed in Toowoomba. He knew it had a shower, and he remembered the comforting shed smells of creosote, paint, and mown grass. Later that morning, at a computer terminal in the local library, he sent an email to his Dad asking if he could come back and live in the shed for a time while he sorted his life out. To his astonishment a reply came back immediately saying that of course he could come home. It was almost as though his Dad had been waiting for him to make contact! At the end of the message his Dad asked if he needed money for a ticket to come home but, the young man knew his own

weakness and asked instead for a ticket that he could claim. Five minutes later his Dad emailed to say that a ticket had been booked for a flight that evening.

There were no friends for him to say good-bye to in Sydney, and no belongings to collect in a bag. The young man simply got on a train and went to the domestic terminal. After he collected his boarding-pass he wondered if he should go back to Toowoomba because of the long lectures he would have to endure. At the same time he imagined feeling safe in a blanket at the back of his Dad's shed, and it was this longing that caused him to board.

Two hours later, as the plane banked over the winking lights of Toowoomba his anxiety started to kick in. He imagined the stony silences and icy stares, but... a plate filled with his Mum's lasagne would be... heaven! His stomach grumbled at the thought, for it had been a long time since he'd had a good meal.

The plane landed at Well Camp airport and the passengers piled off, with many walking quickly past him looking askance at his disheveled appearance. The young man wondered if it would just be his Dad, or if his Mum would also be there to meet him. The thought of seeing them after so long made his eyes watery with tears.

Because of this he could not immediately read the banner held up by the crowd of people at the airport, who cheered and clapped as he came into view. The banner said 'Welcome home!' and the people who hugged him said 'I love you!', and, 'We've missed you!' and the first to do this were his parents, who wrapped him between them as they cried and laughed. But his Grandma was also there, and his cousins, and some friends from school, and the hockey team, and people from church, and... they all seemed to be happy to see him.

The young man looked across the crowd and found the eyes of his brother. His brother's arms were folded and he was shaking his head, clearly troubled. Then his brother turned away and walked quickly through the terminal doors as they slid open. Clearly, not everyone was happy that he'd come home!

Just in case some of you are trying to work out which family in Toowoomba I'm talking about, I need pause here to say very clearly that this is just a story, and the characters are fictional! It is my attempt re-tell the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) in a more contemporary way.

For in the same way that we would be appalled to hear about a son stealing his parents' credit cards before squandering their money, those who first heard Jesus tell this parable would have been appalled that a younger son demanded any inheritance before his father died. And, in the same way we might wonder about the sanity of the parents in my story,

the people who first heard Jesus tell the parable would have wondered why the father agreed to sell his land and give his younger son such wealth before he died. In each version of the story, the love behind the unconditional welcome home seems baffling.

Jesus suggested that this is how God loves us. That no matter where we go, and no matter what we do, God never stops loving us. So, whenever we're feeling lost, unlovable, unforgiveable, and pretty-ordinary about ourselves – this parable offers good news! Really good news! In some ways it may be easier to just leave it there: we are prodigal children, and God welcomes us home with an embrace and a hug... time and time again.

I imagine him whispering, 'I've got you! I love you! Welcome home!'

But, if we sat with the parable for a while longer, we might uncomfortably recognise the times when we have been more like the older brother. Times when we quietly resent the news that God loves not only us, but also those we look down upon; those we are at odds with; and those we think are pretty ordinary! I think that would be true for most of us – so, I reckon it'd be worth praying for God's blessing on that person, or that group of people... because prayer for blessing changes things.

If we continued to sit with the parable, we might also ask if it is enough to simply identify with the prodigal... confident about a God who never stops loving us? Is there also a possible call to be more like the father of this parable? Someone who is almost reckless in generosity, and loving: does God call us to be a little more like that?

Let's gather these thoughts in prayer...

Gracious God,
we give thanks for your love, even when we've been a long way from our best.
Through your Spirit help us to be so secure in your love that it overflows into our thoughts, and words, and actions. Help us to see 'the prodigals' in our life through your eyes and love them in a similar way to the way you love us.

We pray in the name of the one who said, 'Love one another',
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.