**Reflections on Luke 15:1-3,11b-32 (30 March – 5 April 2025)**

**What kind of welcome?**

**Begin with an opening prayer**

Loving God,
we gather in this place assured of your love.
You know our failures, fickleness and faithlessness,
yet you still welcome us into your presence.
Help us to do the same,
welcoming all in your name.
**Amen.**

**Read the passage**

*Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.*

 **15**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. **2**But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

**3**Then Jesus told them this parable: “There was a man who had two sons. **12**The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

**13**“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. **14**After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. **15**So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. **16**He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

**17**“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! **18**I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. **19**I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ **20**So he got up and went to his father.

“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 around him and kissed him.

**21**“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

**22**“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. **23**Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. **24**For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

**25**“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. **26**So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. **27**‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

**28**“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. **29**But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. **30**But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

**31**“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. **32**But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

**Explore and respond to the text**

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

**Bible notes**

Luke uses a common technique here of telling the same story three times, in slightly different ways, in order to drive home the intended message. Jesus is addressing the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling because they have noticed that among the crowd travelling with Jesus and listening to him are ‘tax collectors and sinners’ – that is, those who are working for the occupying Roman forces, and those who are publicly judged to be living in a way that is out of step with God. The Pharisees and scribes are leaders among the Jewish people and work hard to protect the faith from those who might water it down or introduce heresy. Recognising that sometimes we need protecting from ourselves, they are keen to keep God’s people pure. Hearing their grumbling, Jesus tells them in three different ways the importance of seeking out what is lost and celebrating when it is found. The stories are not identical – the sheep, coin and son have different levels of agency in their becoming lost, and in their being found – but the result is always the same: a celebration that mirrors the joy in heaven when someone turns back to God.

This parable, the third in the set, introduces another dimension: the question of how different characters respond to the same event. While the father has longed for the son’s return – not seeking him out against his will but watching out for him to choose to return – and celebrates this, the brother who never left is first (inadvertently perhaps) excluded from the celebration, and then peeved, jealous and angry. He takes for granted the intimate relationship he has sustained with his father and his home securities, and does not wish to risk the change entailed in welcoming the returning brother.

**Reflection**

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

There is a lot of discussion around being a welcoming church. Non-churchgoers often fear coming into a church because it seems a bit foreboding – perhaps they see an old building with locked doors. If they do venture in, there may be weird rules about when to stand up and sit down that no one ever explains. Yet most churches do not think of themselves as unwelcoming. What would a stranger make of your church’s welcome? Is there room for improvement?

**Questions for reflection**

*You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues arising from this week’s Bible passage.*

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* What’s the warmest welcome you’ve ever received?
* How welcoming is your church/group to prodigals/outsiders? Are we sometimes more like the older brother than the father?
* What can you do today to show God’s welcome to someone?

 **A prayer to end the Bible study**

As we go into the coming week, O God,
and strive to walk as people of welcome,
fill us with your grace, mercy and peace.
Bless us, keep us and transform us all,
and help us to share these gifts with all we meet.
**Amen.**