

Lent 4: Taking the wider view
27 March 2022
High Street Uniting Church Frankston
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Read: **Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (The Parable of the Prodigal Son and his brother)**

Gracious God, as we reflect and pray may we recognise ourselves; but more importantly, recognise you and the love you have for us. Amen.

This week I had coffee with Mark Whitby. Mark, as some of you may know, has long been a minister in Frankston with what's now called Frankston Life Community, and he's the main organiser of the Frankston Minister's Network. I think that he was the first ecumenical contact that I made when I first came to Frankston. I remember feeling nervous when I first met him: here was I, very fresh from divorce, feeling somewhat vulnerable meeting a Christian leader from a more Pentecostal background who would likely read some Scriptures in different ways than I do. I felt vulnerable to being labelled as the prodigal one.

That first meeting was, of course, actually fine, even as we tested out our theological differences, agreed to disagree on some matters, and established a good relationship. Mark has a great heart for Frankston, for the welfare of Frankston's people, and for the church in all of its breadth here.

As we met again this week, we talked about how the realm of God is so much bigger than either of us; how he and I both have things about which we're probably right and blind-spots we may not own; how we can take no pleasure in the pains that any churches suffer, like Hillsong. It strikes me that if we did take any pleasure in that we'd be like siblings throwing barbs at each other: siblings like the two in the parable of the prodigal son.

In that parable, one sibling gets carried away with riches and opportunity but then "comes to himself" – marvellous phrase, that – and turns back to seek nothing more than the Father's heart in mercy.

The other sibling gets carried away with riches and opportunity that are not spent, but kept. The parable ends with the opportunity for that sibling to come to himself, too, and rediscover the Father's heart in love.

Of the two siblings in the parable, one comes to himself and says, "I don't deserve that love" – to which the Father responds: but you have it!! The other one says, "I do deserve that love", to which the Father responds: but you have it!! As we were reflecting last week, talking about what someone deserves misses the point when Jesus is on the road to the cross.

At a primary level today's story is about how even the tax collectors and sinners, who are assumed to be like the younger brother whose life has gone to the pigs, are deeply loved by

God who longs for us to “come to ourselves”: to discover, or remember, that we are loved by God, we are children of God – and God runs to greet us and delights to share the kingdom with us.

I think we get that. It's a deeply important message and if you are a person who struggles to think that you 'deserve' God's love, know that you are loved by God; you are God's child.

But there are two siblings in the parable. The older one has long worked for the Father, and sees that what is left of their inheritance is now being given further away to the one who was the outsider.

We who are listening to this story now include a lot of “older brother” types. How could we not be, when we put so much care and effort and heart into the church and into our relationships with God and each other?

Let us be clear: the Father loves the older brother. And the Father's love is not limited to the older brother.

As I have wrestled with this text this week I have been hoping for some miraculous word which would make an obvious link between the conclusion of the sale of Wesley and the situation of the two brothers; or a link with the hazards of riches and opportunity which form the traps for both of the siblings. (For any on phones or in the room who aren't aware, when I say “Wesley” I'm referring to the site of the former Methodist church down the road - there will be a bit more discussion about that after the service).

There aren't any direct links. With the sale of Wesley we neither hoarding wealth nor wasting it. Neither the Synod nor the Congregation can be paralleled to the older or younger brothers, or indeed the Father. You could make something of the reference to the 'inheritance', but at the end of the day the main message is that we are actually all siblings together, and in fact we are only a small part of the bigger picture of God's family.

I recall a few months ago preaching about when Jesus began his “sermon on the plain”, and we imagined him gathered here with his closest disciples, the 12, and also a larger gathering of more disciples, and also multitudes who were gathered around and looking to hear Jesus and be healed. And Jesus addresses not only his disciples who have given their all, but also looks beyond the walls of the church (actually, there isn't even a church where Jesus preaches), but Jesus looks beyond because the message, which starts with “blessed are you poor” includes but goes beyond the inner circle.

Jesus' disciples are asked to think bigger. Or in terms of today's parable, the two siblings have to think bigger.

In today's parable there are some emotions around the questions of inheritance from all concerned. Why wouldn't there be? Among us today as we recognise the completion of the sale and the new financial journey that that means for us, both of those aspects – the sale

and the financial journey – may be felt in our hearts. For some there are feelings of joy and relief, at the good that has been and is being achieved, in the congregation, the community, and the wider church. For some there are feelings of sadness or disappointment, if more had been hoped than has been able to be achieved. For some there may be anger at unexpected outcomes. For some there may be inspiration or fear, for how we might expect the future to look.

God, the Father in this parable, is working on the bigger picture – that's God's assurance for the older child. God's realm is just as sure for all of the siblings, even beyond this group gathered here and online today, as we all work for God's realm.

So I want to offer these words which are linked to the martyr Oscar Romero, written by Bishop Ken Untener.

It helps, now and then,
to step back and take the long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts;
it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime
only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise
that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water the seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations
that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something
and to do it well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter
and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference
between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders;
ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.