

Last week we heard how Jesus firmly spoke against the self-righteous attitude and religious view of people that resulted in unfruitful and unproductive life. He also taught that all people are on equal footing before God, and in need of God's mercy. And most importantly as he spoke through the parable of fig tree, in spite of our fruitlessness, we are still given an opportunity to repent and return to what we have been created for, to bear fruit. Slow to judge and quick to love, seem to be the path of Jesus. Today's passage actually starts with an introduction, when the Pharisees and the Scribes, saw the 'others', outsiders, tax collectors and sinners drawing close to Jesus, they murmured. Jesus is doing something what he was not supposed to do with them! Getting close to them and eating with them! What a disgraceful thing to do! 'They don't deserve this, because they are sinful and should not be anywhere near a religious person!' And it is in this light we turn to the most familiar parable, the father and his two sons! It's important to keep in mind the two other parables, the lost sheep and the lost coin that precede this parable! In both parables, the shepherd and the woman take the initiative to find the lost. To reinforce this message Jesus goes on to say the parable of this interesting family!

We hear about three characters, the father and his two sons! The young man in the parable is not a child but a young man who wants to enjoy his freedom, and often as he is portrayed is not necessarily wicked. But the problem is he insults his father by asking for his inheritance, because no one asks for their share of inheritance in the rural Middle Eastern context until the death of their father. By asking for his share of inheritance he is effectively treating his father as a dead man. He no longer exists for him. Not only that he severs his relationship with his brother and the entire family. The impact of acts such as, division of land and inheritance and breaking his relationship with this family will lessen the family status in the wider community. His father and his brother were exposed to the ridicule by the community. Such an action on the part of the young man deserved moral judgement. The problem is that the young man may be young but certainly misguided in his thinking. If we observe all the details that is narrated in the parable it becomes clear that he is self-centred and he thought only about him and nothing else mattered to him. The 'prodigal son' is not stupid but irresponsible.

What about the father? The older brother?

They must have been humiliated by the actions of the youngest member of the family. Also, they must have been feeling the loss of loved one, the 'baby' of the family! The father had to divide his 'living', even while he is alive. Observing from his actions later we could say that he must have been waiting for his son to return! Interestingly, even before the son said anything, the moment the

father saw the son at a distance, he had compassion and ran towards him and embraced him! Compassion that leads to actions of the father. The father doesn't have mercy but *is* mercy personified. The father portrayed in this parable is unusually caring almost like a mother! Probably there is something for us to keep in mind, Jesus wants to present the father as one who is more than just a father, but has the attitude of a caring and loving mother. We get to see the reasonable disappointment on the part of the older brother. But when he gets irritated with his father and expresses his frustration, we get to see a side of him, which cares only about him and not about his brother or even for that matter his father! We could almost see the same attitude we saw in the younger brother in older brother! After all they are brothers! It is the father who stands out in this story, a man of absolute love and compassion, which does not discriminate the sons according to their deeds!

The important teaching in this parable is that all the three characters could be found in any one of us. We all have the possibility to have the attitude of the rebellious and adventurous young son or the steadfast and conservative older son. But most importantly we have the potential to be the merciful father!

If we have to understand the teaching of power in this parable is that it disturbs and reverses all the accepted norms. In this reversal some may feel that they have lost their rightful place and others may find themselves absolutely blessed! This idea is a continuing theme in the teachings of Jesus Christ that we human beings cannot determine the nature of God and then dictate to God how God should function! The God of Jesus Christ utterly defied human deliberation. This notion was difficult for the religious authorities to accept, because they believed that they had God under their control! By controlling the religious space they controlled God. The authorities decided who could get in, who wouldn't! The sinful and ritually impure had no place near God. Jesus turns that notion on its head and says it's not up to us to decide God's actions towards humanity. As we see the excluded and those who excluded them from the community before Jesus, his message was clear, 'God welcomes everyone and we have no right to stop that'. Like the father in the parable the home of God is open for all, irrespective of our deeds! He invites us to think of a God who doesn't have mercy but *is* mercy; there is no limit at all for his mercy. If we have to understand God's actions in this parable, God refuses to limit the measure of his grace to human ways of seeking and doing things. Jesus seems to be saying we ought not to begrudge God's generosity. We see a conflict between the self-righteous judgemental religious attitude and God's absolute mercy. The 'power' Jesus advocates is found in giving and emptying oneself not in controlling and excluding! Like the older son we are invited to accept this new paradigm of relationships. Are we willing to hear that message?

*Anderson Jeremiah*