

The Father's Heart of Longing Luke 15:11-32.

Sunday 18th Sept 2016 Revd John Beckett

Earlier we were reminded of how Jesus encourages us to call God our Father.

We said that the fatherhood of God is not a central theme of the Old Testament, but it certainly is in the New!

This remarkable truth that we are adopted into God's family as his children and all of the amazing privileges and special status that that brings.

That we are to grow into a relationship with God as Father or dad, just as Jesus has, never presumptuous, but always childlike, intimate affectionate.

But while we are often reminded of how we might feel in our relationship towards God as "Our Father"... we don't often consider how God might feel towards us.

Last weekend, Bishop David Jennings who was the preacher at Stephen Yates's ordination service reminded us of 2 foundational bible passages, and of two words to remember them by.

The first was from 1 Samuel, where the boy Samuel is in the Temple and learns to recognise the voice of God for the first time calling to him in the middle of the night.

He learns to listen.

Listen was the first word.

Listen, what is God saying to you?

The second passage was from John 13 where Jesus washes the disciples' feet at the Last Supper on the night before he died on the cross.

The second word was love.

How might you love by serving others as Jesus demonstrated that night? Yet as +David rightly reminded us, we are only to do this once we have first consented to be loved and served by Jesus ourselves.

Listen and love.

I wanted to remind us today, I wanted to remind Stephen today as he begins his new ministry as deacon, and teacher of God's word, of a third foundational passage in Scripture. And a third word.

From this foundational and wonderful and remarkable story of Jesus, that interweaves closely with the themes of both listen and love, that give us insight into how God the father feels towards you and I.

Listen, love and the third word for today, longing.

The concept of father God who does love us unconditionally, who loves us affectionately, is so hard for us to accept. It's so hard to receive our belovedness.

It's probably the hardest part of the Christian faith.

Why is it hard to receive? Why is it hard to believe that God loves you and longs to be with you like the father in the story, delighting in you, embracing you, kissing you...

Maybe it is because your earthly father was awful or absent.

Maybe we stubbornly hold to the idea that we know best.

But perhaps above all we find it so hard to believe that God longs for us because we simply feel so unlovable.

We know the darkness and shame lies within us.

And we assume that no one could love us if they knew.

And we know that God knows.

Listen to the story about the father:

The farmer father has two sons. The first one is impatient and greedy and demands his inheritance there and then. The father's heart must have been grieved – but as a parent you will know, a child gets to the point where you have to let them go and make their own choices...

so the father grants his son's desire and the son goes off to a far country and spends all of his inheritance on wild living - squandering the money with prostitutes and no doubt fine wine and food as well.

Then the money ran out. There was a famine and he had to go to find work.

The only job he could find for a good Jewish boy was feeding pigs!

He was so hungry he could have eaten the pig swill.

Then at rock bottom he realises that his dad employs people on the farm so why not go home and just get a job there?

And Jesus tells in the story of how he rehearses what he is going to say to his father:

Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son – and he wasn't – make me like one of your hired men. So he got up and went to his father.

This is where it gets remarkable.....*While he was still a long way off his father saw him* his father had undoubtedly been grieving for the loss and foolishness of his son and yet every day he would go out to the farm gate to wait - looking and longing for a glimpse of his son to come up the drive.

While he was still a long way off his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son... I've heard someone say that Jewish men only ran when they were going into battle.

Can you imagine what the son must have felt seeing his father running towards him, knowing what he expected his father should be feeling towards him for wasting his inheritance?

But no instead of anger, *he threw his arms around him and kissed him.* What?!

The son tried to share his prepared confession, but before he can get all of the words out his father has interrupted him saying to the servants:

quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put the ring on his fingers and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate!

Do you see how the fathers welcome preceded even the full confession.

One commentator said: "This was no qualified acceptance or cautious reception. This was no standing on ceremony. "

This is the father who welcomes the lost son home and restores him to his full position of Sonship again – even though he was not worthy of that position.

Love. Longing.

Listen. Can you hear the call of the father's heart of love who is longing to welcome you home whatever you have done, however far off you are, waiting patiently, looking out for you to turn around, come to your senses and begin to come home...

Perhaps you recognise how you've been running away from what God is calling you to do or be – or maybe admit you are at the end of your resources and can no longer manage on your own...

When we turn back, listen to the love...

My son, my daughter, I'm so glad that you're home. I love you being close to me, our relationship restored. I love you being home safe at my side in my arms, where you no longer need fear, knowing your belovedness.

Can you hear how God the father longs for you to know him as dad, father?

Have you known that place of intimacy in the embrace, in the strong arms of God?

Oddly enough, many of us in church are **also** like the other lost son in the story.

The older son who stayed at home with his father.

He had remained obedient and loyal and was hard-working – especially with his brother disappearing - and yet clearly had never recognised how much his father loved him too. He had never learned to celebrate that relationship.

We hear him seriously resentful of his younger brother. He heard the music and dancing going on in the house and may even have guessed what was going on – he would have known how much the father was always on the look out for his return...

He did not even feel able to go into the house himself but instead asks one of the servants what is going on. And angrily he refuses to go into the party - so his father comes out and pleads with him to come in.

The brother refuses – “your son”, he begins – he doesn’t even acknowledge him as a brother any more at this point, “your son has hurt you and yet you still welcome him back, kill the fatted calf and reinstate him with ring and robe? What about me!”

Sometimes in our churches we can feel a similar resentment to the amount of effort that we put in towards reaching out to people who do not know yet about the love of Jesus, or resentful that some people don’t behave in church as you do!

Well, like it or not, Jesus reminds us more than once, the father is unreasonably generous – we just have to get over it!

Maybe you are one of those people who have worked hard and been loyal in coming to church all your life and yet are ironically lost and far away because you have never recognised the longing heart of the father towards you too.

My son, (my daughter), the father says: you are always with me and everything I have is yours... You could have celebrated the intimacy that we share all this time, simply enjoyed our being together, working together, but you never have done that – yet. Come, join in the party! Know the delight of our Father in you!

At New Wine this year one of the speakers was reminding us of how hard it is as a parent to **show** how much you love your children.

You can buy them presents, you can give them hugs, you can help them out, you can look after the grandchildren...

And if you are a parent and you have seen your child hurting or distant or failing in any way, you will know that longing, that love that is so deep yet cannot be expressed with words. That longing to be close, the longing for them to be secure and safe and at peace. You would do anything for them.

And this story is all about God the father who shows his love - in Jesus dying for us and also about the Father who feels that longing for us, not because of what we have done, or how hard we have worked for him but simply because of who we are in Jesus – his beloved son or daughter.

He’s our father. He is never too busy.

He’s our father, he is consistent and compassionate.

He’s our father, he longs for us to stop rebelling be at home in his arms in an intimate love relationship with him, whether we’ve claimed it before or not.

Listen. Love. Longing.

Listen – what is God saying to you right now? You may not feel very lovable, but to me, you are the apple of my eye!

Listen to his heart of Longing to you to come home.

It will not only change you, but you will also find that you begin to share the Father’s heart of longing love for every other person who is lost and far from home as well.