

My husband Peter who is a commercial airline pilot tells me that things look different at 30,000 feet – here on the ground we tend to get bogged down in the detail, not being able to see the wood from the trees, where as at 30,000 feet we get a bird’s eye view and the picture begins to look a little clearer. And although you’ll be pleased to hear that it’s not his usual practise to take a passenger jet up to 30,000 feet, he assures me that if we get that far up the entire picture is completely evident.

We’ve been looking at what is perhaps Jesus’ most well known parable for 5 weeks now and this morning I’m going to finish our series by looking at the context of the story in the whole bible.

Because in this seemingly simple but multi layered story it seems to me that Jesus gives us the essence of the entire biblical storyline in one vivid narrative. And if we see that, we actually get a bird’s eye view, or a big picture view of what the bible is all about. Usually we take tiny portions of scripture and pull apart or exegete every word and phrase looking for every subtle nuance but today we’re going to completely step back and get a view from 30,000 feet as it were. At this distance, the bible is essentially about 3 things:

The human condition

The divine solution

The hope of the future

We're going to take a look at each of these but before we do I need to define a term for you with my one and only joke for the day:

A police car pulls up in front of Grandma Bessie's house, and Grandpa Morris gets out. The polite policeman explains that this elderly gentleman said that he was lost in the park and couldn't find his way home.

"Oh, Morris," says grandma, "you've been going to that park for 30 years! How could you get lost?"

Leaning close to grandma so that the policeman can't hear, Grandpa whispers, "I wasn't lost; I was just too tired to walk home."

Jesus often spoke of sin and salvation in terms of being lost and found. We know that immediately prior to his story of the prodigal, Jesus told 2 other parables about lostness. The first is about a shepherd who discovers that one of his sheep is lost and the second, about a woman who discovers that one of her coins is lost. And as we've heard over the last few weeks, the prodigal son is actually about two sons who are, in different ways, both lost. The younger son with a lostness that we easily identify – he is selfish, undisciplined and reckless and his life begins to collapse around him- his lostness is very familiar to many of us. But as we've discovered the elder son is

spiritually lost too – his self image is based on just that – himself and how hard working and obedient and moral he is. His lostness is based on his feeling superior to his brother – and as we begin to understand this type of lostness we can recognise it all around us too in racism and classism and religious and spiritual snobbery – when we judge people as being less than us in some way or another.

So now let's take ourselves up for a 30,000 foot view and recognise that the Bible from start to finish has a sweeping theme of lostness, which is sometimes known as exile, and culminates in not just individual redemption of that lostness, but indeed of the whole human race.

Lostness has its roots right back in Genesis when man and woman were created for a world that in 2010 we can barely recognise – it was a world built on love, a place of right relationships, a place of plenty and great beauty, with no sickness, disease or death. It was a world that lived in the presence of God. It's no wonder that our world sometimes feels so wrong, no wonder there is so much we don't understand, no wonder that we sometimes feel so lonely and cut off from God.....

But none of this is God's fault – it was us right from the start! We were the ones who couldn't bear to live under the authority of God, who had to have our own way. We were the ones who were selfish, undisciplined and reckless – and we turned away and became alienated or lost from the father and the result was exile.

'So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life' Genesis 3:23-24

The bible says that the human race has been wandering as spiritual exiles ever since. We're living in a place that is no longer in the presence of our Heavenly father and no longer resembles the Garden of Eden. We are living in a place that no longer meets the very deepest longings of our heart. Our bodies get tired and weary, they get sick and age and die. Our relationships are often a struggle – even in the midst of family we battle anger, resentment and disappointment. Many of us are unfulfilled and we never fully realise our hopes and dreams. As hard as we try, we simply can't re-

create the home that was lost with Adam and Eve – it exists only in the presence of the God from which we have fled.

The German philosopher Heidegger called this *unheimlichkeit*. The word translates as ‘eeriness’ or ‘uncanniness’ but literally means ‘away from home’. Heidegger is referring to the anxiety and spiritual distress that comes from never quite feeling at home in the world.

When I was a teenager my family circumstances were dire. My brother had died in a tragic accident and my parents’ already precarious marriage had completely disintegrated. Mum was terribly unwell after years of battling violence and other difficulties, her heart had been broken with Bradley’s death, and she and my sister and brother left the family home and moved to the city. I too packed up and went to boarding school for my last 2 years of high school. Although it was an oasis of peace and calm in many ways, I dreaded the holidays and long weekends. This was when all the other girls went home and I stayed in the boarding house. Sometimes I was invited home with one of the other boarders – my friend Katy. She too came from a farm and her country home was full of older brothers working the property, lots of activity, huge country meals

cooked by her mum – they were incredibly gracious hosts to me but somehow I always went back to boarding school more home sick than ever. You see, I longed to go home to the home of my childhood but it simply didn't exist any longer. Mum and my siblings were gone, the family was irrevocably split and I was living in a state of *unheimlichkeit* – an eeriness that everything I had known was gone. I was no longer at home in my world and I felt like a visitor. The things I did, the stuff I got involved in, during those years in a vain attempt to make myself feel better about my life are another less than pretty story altogether – and it was not until quite some years later when the damage had been done that I finally realised that what I was longing for could not be fulfilled with the things of this world.

This exile, or alienation from home and God, is played out again and again in the bible. After Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden their son Cain restlessly wanders the earth after he murders his brother Abel. Jacob cheats his father and flees into exile. Joseph ends up in Egypt and there the Israelite's are enslaved until the time of Moses. David lives much of his life as a hunted fugitive and finally the whole nation of Israel is exiled again in Babylon. Even after the Jews return to their home land their story is one of domination at the ends of other powers – Greece, Syria, Rome..... Story after story in

the Old Testament contains the same pattern of exile and lostness, but in the end the exoduses and homecomings that the prophets promise and the people long for, fail to deliver.

Why? Because true homecoming is about far more than returning to a place. True home coming is about restoration of everything that has been broken – both within us and around us. The story of the bible is that human beings throughout the course of human history remain selfish, undisciplined, and reckless! As much as our history is littered with conflict and war as we commonly think of it, even more so are our very natures! We are broken people – badly in need of fixing. Add to this that we live in a world that is fallen and broken. Natural disasters, disease and death are not part of God’s original and perfect plan. This world, as it now exists, is not our true home.

But God has a solution to the problem - a divine solution. A baby is born, not in a palace but an animal trough in a stable. As an adult he lives a nomadic life with no home to call his own.

‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nest, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head’ Matthew 8:12

He moves amongst the people, living with them, eating with them, healing them. He declares that ‘the time has come. The kingdom of God is near’ and calls the people to ‘repent and believe the good news’ Mark 1:15

Finally he is rejected and betrayed by his own, even though they have been promised and are waiting for the Messiah, and he is taken outside of the city gates, that in itself a powerful symbol of rejection or exile, and crucified. And as he dies he cries out ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Matthew 27:46.

In describing Jesus’ last words Timothy Keller exclaims ‘was there ever a more tremendous cry of spiritual dereliction and homelessness?’

This is Keller’s take on what happened – Jesus had not come to simply deliver one nation from political oppression, but to save all of us from sin, evil, and death itself. He came to bring the human race Home. Therefore he did not come in strength but in weakness. He came and experienced the exile that we deserved. He was expelled from the presence of the Father, he was thrust into the darkness, the

uttermost despair of spiritual alienation – in our place. He took upon himself the full curse of human rebellion, cosmic homelessness, so that we could be welcomed into our true home’

Just as the father came out from his home and brought his son in from exile to the feast, so Jesus left his home that he might bring us home once and for all time.

The feast is an important part of the story. In OT days, meals sealed covenants, celebrated victories, and marked all special family occasions. Indeed a feast was established to mark the greatest event in the salvation history of God’s people to that time – the Passover. Feasts were prolonged affairs that lasted all evening, and sometimes for days and nights on end. They were a powerful symbol of home and family. But we don’t need to be people of OT days to grasp the important of feasts. Even today a celebration is not complete without a flash meal. Baptisms, weddings and funerals are all somewhat incomplete in our own society without a meal. At the increasingly rare times that all my family gathers around the table eating, talking and laughing, I feel as though we’re not only feeding our bodies, but indeed our hearts and our souls. No matter what else may be going wrong around me, this is when I feel most ‘at home’.

Jesus turned the customs of his day on their head with his eating and feasting habits! Not only did he ridicule the Jews preoccupation with elaborate rules about food, he infuriated religious leaders by eating with sinners– which in those days made you a sinner too! But he didn't just eat with them for the sake of inclusiveness or to defy convention – rather he used it as an opportunity to call people to change. Not to be perfect, only repentant.

Little wonder then that at his last meal, shared not only with his closest friends but also with the one that would betray him, he instituted a meal of remembrance that we call Communion or the Lord's supper. To eat at the communion table we don't have to be perfect, only repentant. Anyone can come! The meal of bread and wine that we share around the Lord's table is designed as a sinner's feast – a meal of celebration – just like the one in the story of the Prodigal!

Right at the start of this series Stu told us that the word prodigal means 'recklessly extravagant' and we tend to identify the younger son with these traits. We bandy around the title of the parable as 'the prodigal son'. But in fact if you look at a good translation of the

parable the younger son is never referred to as prodigal, rather he is only described as lost. Isn't it instead the father who is the real prodigal – isn't it he who is the most recklessly extravagant – recklessly holding out his tunic and running out to meet his son, abandoning all dignity, adorning him with the best robe that money could buy, placing the family ring on his finger, providing a hideously expensive feast fit for a king and large enough for the entire village to come and eat their fill.

And isn't God recklessly extravagant in his love for us? Didn't he give up that which was most precious to him, his only son, to bring us home? Isn't it because Jesus conquered death, that we can conquer whatever comes in life and live abundantly? Doesn't he set a table before us and beg us to come in to the feast and eat with him?

And we're told that the relationship that we can have with God now, the full and abundant life that we can have now, is just a foretaste of what is to come to those of us who live and die in Christ.

Just as at the end of the parable there is a homecoming feast, so too at the end of the book of Revelation, at the end of history, there is a

feast. The prophet Isaiah talked about the blessings that God will give to his people at the end of the age:

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine- the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. Isaiah 25:6-8

But the truth is that those of us who choose to can claim the promises of Isaiah in our life today. For sure we will never truly be home until we are home with God, but in the meantime we can begin to experience glimpses of God's eternal realities in our day to day lives.

A relationship with God is something to celebrate, and his presence in our life should make every day worth celebrating. Even in the tough days we can have hope, because we know how the story will end. My kids love to watch the same movies over and over again and that means that over the years I've got to know a couple of movies really well too. I've noticed that the more times I've seen a particular

movie, the more I can enjoy it because I know how the story ends – I’m not so scared in the scary bits any longer, I’m not sniffing through all the sad bits, I know that the bad guy eventually gets caught and I can relax knowing that Mr Darcy and Elizabeth do eventually end up together. Because I know the ending, I enjoy the movie on a whole different level.

That’s the way we can choose to look at life. We don’t have to worry about the outcome because we know what the ultimate outcome will be. We don’t have to wonder if God will take care of us. We don’t have to wonder if he’ll make everything work together for his good. We know in a day to come there will be no more sickness, disease and death and that he will wipe away every tear. On even the toughest days, that’s his promise to us.

The second promise from the passage in Isaiah is that every day can be a day of freedom. (On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all people.....)

Do you know what a shroud is? It’s what they wrapped a dead body in in ancient times. People in some cultures still do this today. Well some of us feel like our lives are wrapped in a shroud – it’s as if parts

of us are wrapped in the things of death. Some of our marriages are dying, perhaps our careers, our relationships with our children, our finances, our habits. Maybe even our spiritual lives are dead.....but God promises he can destroy the shrouds and our lives can stand apart from those things that tie us and hold us back from abundant life now.

Jesus said ‘You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free...if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed’. John 8:32,36

And ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me...he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners...to release the oppressed’. (Luke 4:18)

Although the day will come when our lives and relationships will be completely restored, Jesus came that through him we can experience glimpses of this right now.

And what about the third promise that he will remove the disgrace of his people?

We’ve all been disgraced by sin. We’ve all done things that have brought us shame. We’ve said things we wish we’d never said, we’ve

done things we wish we'd never done, we've thought things we wish we'd never thought. Because God the father came running out to meet us in the form of Jesus, because Jesus paid the price for every sin that we've ever committed, every sin we will ever commit, our disgrace has been removed and we are restored. All we need to do is ask for forgiveness and restoration; and we can experience it today.

Unlike other religions where the things of this life are considered temporal and completely unimportant, there is no question in my mind that God cares deeply about what happens to us in this life and about what happens in this world. We know from Genesis that when God made this world he declared it to be good. He loves and cares for the material world of which we are a part. Keller has this to say about the hope of the future:

The fact of Jesus' resurrection and the promise of a new heaven and new earth show clearly that he still cares for it. This world is not simply a theatre for individual conversion narratives, to be discarded at the end when we all go to heaven. No, the ultimate purpose of Jesus is not only individual salvation and pardon for sins but also the renewal of this world, the end of disease, poverty, injustice, violence, suffering, and death. The climax of history is not a higher form of

disembodied consciousness but a feast. God made the world with all its colours, tastes, lights, sounds, with all its life-forms in interdependent systems. It is now marred, stained, and broken, and he will not rest until he has put it right.

Our role in that now of course is carrying on the work and ministry of Jesus Christ until he comes again. As Christians we simply can't be passive about hunger, sickness and injustice. Whilst Karl Marx said that religion is 'the opiate of the masses', on the contrary Christianity teaches us that God hates the suffering and oppression of the material world so much, he was willing to get involved in it and to fight against it and expects us to participate in that – in fact Jesus went so far as to say that if we neglect to serve the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the lonely and the prisoner we do not serve him and we will lose our inheritance of eternal life. (Matthew 26:6)

And just in case you think that that is at odds with what we've learnt from prodigal parable Keller has this to say:

'Younger brothers are too selfish and elder brothers are too self-righteous to care for the poor. The inevitable sign that you know you

are a sinner saved by sheer, costly grace is a sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service’.

So whilst we can, and I believe God wants us to experience a glimpse today of what he has in store for us at the end of history, and expects that we will offer that to others as well as take it for ourselves, there can be no doubt that the feast that is promised then surpasses all that we have ever or can ever know. Revelation 19 calls it the ‘marriage supper of the Lamb’ whilst Jesus himself said ‘many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven’. (Matthew 8:11)

And that brings us back to where we started from this morning – that Jesus’ great prodigal parable retells the story of the entire Bible and the story of the human race. It tells us that choosing to live our own way leads to lostness and exile but that there is a better way through him. We can enter that way because God loves us so recklessly and extravagantly that he withheld nothing and sent the true elder brother to show us the way home. And whilst in him we can have a foretaste now of what is to come, it is just that. The ultimate party and feast awaits us!

Will you pray with me please?

Heavenly Father,

We stand in awe of the reckless and extravagant love that you have shown us in the life and death of Jesus Christ and we humbly say thank you. Thank you that even now we can begin to experience the future promises you have for each one of us. Help us to wake up each day and celebrate your love and grace and the relationship we can have with you. Help us to throw off the things that shroud our lives that we may be truly free to live abundant lives. And may each one of us turn to you in repentance, that we may be fully restored both now and for eternity. In Jesus name we pray Lord, amen.

I really wish it was communion Sunday and that we could finish our worship today with a feast – because it's around his communion table that we are able to feel most at home in this life and we get a tiny foretaste of just what God has promised us into the future. But instead I thought we could celebrate the gifts of love and grace that God has for each one of us by affirming our faith and saying a concluding prayer together – will you stand?

Prayer

I'm going to finish our service now with the benediction but if you would like to pray or talk with someone there will be elders and the prayer ministry team here at the front. Please stay if that's what God is telling you to do, otherwise enjoy fellowship in the courtyard.

And now, blessed and glorious God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

You are ours, and we are yours

To the glory and praise of your name

Amen

