

## Costly Discipleship: Counting the cost of reconciliation

*Sermon delivered by Chris Hancock at St Mary's Ewell*

*6<sup>th</sup> March, 2016*

May I speak in the name of the living and loving God whom we know as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen**

“A man had two sons”...

This is Luke’s brilliant, concise opening for a story of family strife. A man had two sons is a recurring biblical situation (or literary *topos*) that brings to mind Adam with his sons Cain and Abel<sup>1</sup>, Abraham with Isaac and Ishmael<sup>2</sup>, Isaac with Jacob and Esau<sup>3</sup>. Each of these is a story of competition for favour and inheritance. It is a situation which I have always found it easy to relate to, as my father had two sons...

I was the older one – the good one – as in the parable - staying at home – I mowed the lawn and helped my father with his DIY projects. One summer I even repainted the house.

Meanwhile my brother, my younger brother, liked to go out and see his ‘friends’ in fact, he was always going out, and seeing his friends.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 4:1-16

<sup>2</sup> Gen 21:8-21

<sup>3</sup> Gen 25:19-34

And as soon as he was old enough, he learned to drive and then asked to borrow the family car. He would then disappear off to see his friends and be gone – sometimes all night

And I would stay at home – deeply disgruntled. I was the older one – it should have been me who was off out ‘with friends’. It should have been me driving the family car.

It should have been me worrying my parents: “where is he?” they would say – “surely he should be back by now?”

And when eventually he reappeared much later than he had promised – far from castigating him and punishing him. They smiled and laughed – they were glad to see him. And, of course, glad to see the car!

I wasn’t – I skulked in my room and refused to come down for dinner – claiming to be revising for exams, but actually seething.

It was not until I was a parent myself that I began to understand the realities of a parent’s unconditional love.

It does not matter what your child has done – what pain you are put through – you keep on loving – keep on giving.

That generosity is one of the messages of this parable – the father has been waiting for this day, looking out for his lost son, scanning the horizon

and when he sees his son in the distance he runs towards him – pulling up his skirts, in a way most unseemly for an old man - his heart leaping for joy in his chest.

He showers his returning son with hugs and kisses, giving up his own coat, his ring, the sandals from his feet – killing the fatted calf and laying on a party to celebrate.

It's all about giving: the abundant, even excessive generosity of the Father is the generous forgiveness of God.

It is not a trivial point that at the heart of forgiveness is the word 'give'.

But the father had two sons...

We turn then to the older son who remains aloof, unreconciled. When all others are celebrating he refuses to join the feast. He keeps himself apart.

This parable explores ideas about distance. Following on from stories of the lost sheep and lost coin. It shows how you can be lost when you away in a distant land or lost when you are locked in your room at home.

So it ends on a pastoral cliff hanger - with the older son shown the way by the father – the way of sacrifice and love. Will he take it?

What is his problem? Well as the older son I have some sympathy for him. He has done nothing wrong and yet he feels mistreated.

He is weighing the actions of his father and trying to measure the 'love' which he is receiving versus the love which is being shown to his brother. He feels he is receiving less love than he deserves.

But you cannot measure love – you cannot weigh it on a scales, attach it to a meter, or measure it with a ruler. A physicist will tell you, there are no SI units for Love.

Nor does it have a monetary value – you cannot make a love deposit in a bank, trade it for goods, or sell it on a market. You cannot buy love and you cannot sell it.

[It does not matter how much you have spent on your mother's day flowers – it genuinely is the thought that counts!]

Love, the love that comes from God, is infinite and indivisible.

And so the father tells the elder son - "All that I have is yours". My love for you is unlimited.

The challenge for the older son is to respond to the love which he has received from his father and show it in turn to his brother.

Sometimes that can be difficult when we feel we are in the right.

I saw an example of this during the week. I was travelling down the M25 late at night and they were closing some of the lanes for roadworks

You know the scenario. Over the space of a mile, four lanes had to become one.

There is lots of warning and some people immediately start slowing down and moving over to the indicated lane. These are the good citizens, the dutiful older sons. (I bet they mowed the lawn for their parents and helped with the DIY.)

There are others, however, who want to keep moving quickly – their lives are more important, their time is more precious, rules are not made for them - and they leave it to the very last minute to cut in.

They get right up against the cones and then start indicating. They look out of their side windows trying then to catch the eye of the people in the continuing lane. Pleading to be let in.

These are the younger sons begging for forgiveness at the eleventh hour.

Those in the correct lane, meanwhile, hold the wheel firmly and look straight ahead using all their driving skill to stay as close as possible to the car in front in order to avoid having to let them in.

And so what happens? Everyone gets stressed and it takes ages to jockey through the narrowing gap.

This is a process of reconciliation – of two different positions being harmonised

[Luke's gospel is full of financial analogies, and I always think of this as like an accounting reconciliation – there is the bank's position and there is my position and in order for the two to be reconciled I need to see the world from the other person's point of view.]

In these situations, full reconciliation often only occurs when someone gives way – someone has to make the first move. Someone has to give up a position, write off a debt - something they care about or feel strongly about. Someone has to make a sacrificial act for the good of all.

To be forgiven is an easy thing; to forgive – to be like God – turns out to be much harder.

This is what is meant by the costly grace of which Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his great work on Christian discipleship<sup>4</sup>. The easy bit is to repent and to receive God's generous grace. The hard bit is to be like God and to forgive in return. The Cost of discipleship is to follow God in forgiving.

A man had two sons, a manager had two employees

I have direct experience of this in my working life - I was made redundant by a manager who fired me to save the position of one of his long term

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<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer, D., 1948. *The Cost of Discipleship*. London: SCM Press

friends. I found another role but could not bear the sight of the manager after that.

I would try to avoid him – turn around in corridors – get out of lifts at the wrong floor. He in turn would avoid my eye. He knew that he had done wrong.

Then one day several years later, I saw him in the street. I crossed the road to meet him. I walked towards him and shook his hand. I don't know if he ever knew what that took for me, what it meant for me – but only then was I at peace. And I think perhaps he was too.

Desmond Tutu, who knows a thing or two about reconciliation, speaks of forgiveness becoming a habit, a way of life: a life changing way of life. He writes:

'When I develop a mindset of forgiveness rather than a mindset of grievance, I don't just forgive a particular act. I become a more forgiving person. ... When I have a forgiveness mindset I start to see the world not through grievance but through gratitude. In other words, I look at the world and start to see what is right. .... What was once a grave affront, melts into nothing more than a careless word or thoughtless act. What was once

a cause of rupture and alienation, becomes an opportunity for repair and intimacy<sup>5</sup> – even for love.

Wendy spoke two weeks ago about the benefits of living in community – living in relationships brings with it the need to be reconciled with others when inevitably relationships go wrong.

Sue talked last week about finding a rule of life, well one such rule might be to focus on one's relationships and strive to be reconciled to all.

In this we become true disciples and follow God who, as St Paul reminds us 'has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation'<sup>6</sup>.

When we follow him and are reconciled to others then we become true disciples, even in Paul's words, 'ambassadors for Christ'<sup>7</sup>

God has made the first move in his self-incarnation and self-sacrifice in Christ so that all can be reconciled to him.

Nowhere is this more clear than in Christ's celebratory feast of reconciliation when we share not the fatted calf, but one bread and one cup.

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<sup>5</sup> Tutu, D. and Tutu, M., 2014. *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. New York: HarperOne (pp.218-9)

<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor 5:18

<sup>7</sup> 2 Cor 5:20

Our mission, our discipleship is to take that reconciliation received through Christ at the altar and lead in sharing it with others in our lives outside this place.

We must be irrationally generous in the giving of our forgiveness

We must be prepared for it to hurt, for it to be sacrificial.

We must be prepared to seek out reconciliation not to avoid it.

To smile at those who cut across our path

To scan the horizon for the lost and cross the road to meet those who have done us wrong.

**Amen**

*Notes from a Sermon given by Chris Hancock*

*at St. Mary's Ewell, 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2016*

*Drawing all of these thoughts together, Common worship offers this as an alternative post Communion prayer*

*Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. May we*

*who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name; through Christ our Lord.*

**Amen.**