

Luke 15:11-32

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Preacher: Rico Tice

[0:00] Please be seated. Thank you for coming this Palm Sunday. I wonder if you could reach for the Bibles if you've got one. And we're going to look at this famous short story, page 874. So if you can flick to it. Do come back to the little Christian Explored course to ask any questions you might have of it.

But we'd love it if you could just flick to it now. That'd be a great help. And mobile phones. I don't know if you've got a mobile phone on you. If you could try and turn it off, that'd be great. If your mobile goes off during the sermon, you'll be taken outside and stoned. So my advice is to turn it off if you would. That'd be lovely.

So mobile phones, that'd be great. 874, Luke chapter 15 on this Palm Sunday. And let me pray as we begin. Father, thank you so much for Palm Sunday.

Thank you that it's in this story that Jesus told. Thank you for the relevance of these parables. And we pray that you'd speak to each one of us in the very depths of our being now.

We ask indeed that what we learn now would stay with us all our days and into eternity. So address us, we pray. Amen. Amen. Recently, a friend of mine who lives hundreds of miles from me rang me.

[1:20] And he said to me on the phone, Rico, I'm reaching out. Really, it's because the doctor tells me I've had a bit of a breakdown. I've been lying to people about the products I sell them for years. And the pressure of that has now broken me.

I'm also missing my kids desperately since the divorce. Christmas was awful without them. And worst of all, he said at the moment, he said, a friend of mine keeps ringing me. His young wife has just died of cancer.

He keeps ringing me. And I don't know what to say to him. Rico, I'm reaching out. It's quite a big thing to say in our individualistic culture. And what do you say to him? And honestly, ladies and gentlemen, what I wanted to say to him was this story that we've just had read.

I wanted him to look at it. Because it's about life. It explains life. It's about being human. It's about the less life can be. It's about admitting and having the courage to admit that I'm not far from despair.

And at this moment, I'm just holding on by my fingertips. And it's about an emptiness that can gnaw at the soul and broken relationships. Broken domestic relationships. I don't know about your family.

[2:21] But in my family, we have broken domestic relationships. And it's an agony. But above all, ladies and gentlemen, this story on this Palm Sunday is about experiencing a relationship of such generosity, such love, such kindness that it can turn any life around.

That's why what we have before us today is the most famous short story ever told. Ladies and gentlemen, it's because it's changed millions of lives. It's got such power, such meaning, such pathos.

It changes lives. So I wonder if we can look at it together this morning. Just to summarize, it's a family story. It's about a father who has two sons. Recently on Mothering Sunday, I was thinking, I don't know where the mother is.

I'm not sure the boys would have got in such a mess. Their mother was there, but she's not there. A friend of mine tells it rather neatly. He says, Rico, it starts at home. Then the younger son gets sick of home. So he gets out.

Eventually, he goes to being plain sick. And then he's homesick. Then ends with him home again. The father's thrilled to have him home. Throws a party. The older brother finds out. And he's sick

about that. So that's how the story goes.

[3:24] And as Jesus tells the story, ladies and gentlemen, it becomes obvious in the story that the father is like God. And the two groups listening to the story are the two constituencies.

There's the tax collectors and sinners. I wonder if we can look down. Can we see chapter 15, verse 1? The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And that is the younger son's constituency. And then there are the Pharisees and the scribes grumbling.

This man receives sinners and eats with them. And that's the older brother's constituency. And here's the amazing thing. Ladies and gentlemen, it's as though as the story's being told, Jesus lifts up a mirror and he says, you're in it.

Do you know, whenever I used to read my kids' stories, I'm such an egotist. I always used to put myself in the story. Well, can I say, ladies and gentlemen, you're in it today. I don't know if at it was being read, you thought, oh, I'm in the story.

Well, you are. You've got to walk on part. So as we look at it together, I wonder if you can see yourself. And we're meant to see ourselves in the story. Who are you in the story?

[4:28] So let's go. I've only got two points. First of all, there is a deceptive contrast between these two sons. Can we have a look down? So the microphone's up. The mirror's up.

Let's have a look. And verse 11, let's start there. Do we see? There was a man who had two sons. And then we begin with the younger son. And he's what you might call the out-and-out rebel. And here he is in verse 12. And the younger of them said to his father, father, give me the share of property. That is coming to me. And he divided his property between them and set off for a distant country.

Now, this younger son cuts loose. And he says, dad, he says, dad, do you know that life insurance you've taken out for me? And his father says, yeah. He says, dad, actually, I'd like my share now. And his father says, well, actually, son, those things are immature when I die. And the son says, yeah, dad, you've got the point. I wish you were dead. That's what he's saying in the story. Look, in that culture, it was just like our culture.

[5:29] You basically inherit from parents once they're dead. So this boy is saying to his father, I wish you were dead. And I want your things, but I don't want you.

So you see, the father in the story is a bit like God. And some people treat God just like that. They act as though he's an irrelevance. They don't want him. They want the gifts, but they don't want him. And if there's one, two words that are the slogan, can we see them in verse 12 as we look down? Let's have a look at the slogan. Here's the slogan. Father, give me. Give me the gifts. I want fun, family, friends, falling in love, food, fitness, but I don't want you.

And here's the question. Ladies and gentlemen, what was it that so attracted this young man to life without God? Why does he say this?

And I think it's because this is his independence day. That's what he's doing. He didn't want to be dependent on God. He's saying to his father, I don't need you. And can you imagine, he's probably feeling great as he's walking down the drive with the remains of the life insurance in his back pocket.

[6:34] And he thinks, yes, yes, I'm free. I'm out of here. Because he is convinced, as so many are in the culture, independence, wild living, pleasure.

That'll make me happy. That's the key to happiness. Independence, wild living, pleasure. And I'm away, and give me, and I'm gone. And don't you think he had the slight butterflies in his tummy as he went down the drive?

He says, no, I'm away from here. I'll do what I want. Brilliant. So give me, and he's gone. Now, I don't know if you can relate to that. Just to say, if you can, it's brilliant you're here this morning. But it may be you relate a bit more to the older brother. Let's have a look at him. And he's what you might call the establishment figure. And he tells us a bit about himself. Can we look down in verse 29? Let's see verse 29.

When he has a public row with his father outside his brother's party. Verse 29. But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him. Verse 29.

[7:34] But he answered his father, look, these many years I've served you. And I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me even a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.

Do you see? He's the dutiful child. He's joined the family firm. He's hardworking. He's loyal. Job wise. He's something boring like a solicitor or an accountant.

You can see it, can't you? It's obvious. And where his father is, he's close around. So he'd be an elder at IPC. He'd be on the eldership. I mean, he's what the Brits would call a fine, upstanding chap.

He's very different from his brother. But it's a deceptive contrast. He's not like his brother. But he's nothing like his father either. Do we see as we look down verse 28? Let's just see that in verse 28. When his brother comes home, he was angry and refused to go in. So, you know, typical accountant. So much repressed anger. You can see it, can't you? But you see the brother comes home. And the father's glad.

[8:32] The brother's angry. The father greets him with open arms. The brother with clenched fists. The father says, my son. The brother, verse 30, says, this son of yours. In other words, he says, I'm not even from the same gene pool as this boy.

How dare you relate him to me, this son of yours. He's nothing to do with me. So you see, this older brother thought he was the model of unselfishness. But actually, all he can think about is himself. Have a look at verse 29. Do you see? I, me, or mine come up four times. Look all these years. I've served you. And I never disobeyed your commands. Yet you never gave me even a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.

He's actually totally self-obsessed. It was Samuel Butler who wrote about two incredibly selfish people called Mr. and Mrs. Carlisle. And he wrote this. How good of God for Carlisle and Mrs. Carlisle to marry one another and so make two people miserable instead of four.

And it's on here, isn't it? Now, here's the issue, ladies and gentlemen. If you want to think about religion, then these two boys are very different. But if you want to think about the heart of the Christian faith as we come to this Easter week, which, ladies and gentlemen, is relationship with God?

[9:44] That's what we're on about. Then these two boys, well, they're both out of sorts. They're both out of relationship with their father. You know, if it's religion, well, it's just a bunch of rules.

But actually, we're meant to relate to God. And he's meant to be as central to our life as a ball is to a game. And a lot of people think, well, it's just religion. It's just rules. Well, the rules are great. But actually, no.

It's a relationship in which he's as central to life as a ball is to a game. And both these boys are out of relationship with their father. It's a deceptive contrast. One's religious, the other's not. One's respectable, the other's not.

They're both out of relationship with their father. So when it comes to you, where are you? Now, it might be that you're in the younger son's constituency. And can I say, if that's the case, there are, I'm amazed at the moment nationally, there are thousands of people, particularly young men, going back to church.

Thank you for joining them. It's an extraordinary time nationally as people are flooding back. But it's great to have you here. And thank you for coming. You're probably rather amazed to see yourself sitting here.

[10:51] Well, it's just a joy to have you. But it might be that you're a respectable conventional type. And so actually, you're more like the older brother. But if you're honest, your religion has as much in common with real relationship with God as a cold, frigid, formal marriage has in common with a real lifelong love story.

And here's the question. How can you tell if you're in the older brother's constituency? What's the diagnosis? And actually, this occurred to me as Paul preached to Galatians, Paul's letter to the Galatians.

But this is the diagnosis, I think. It's if your experience of the Christian faith, and even as you come out this morning, makes you feel, now you never say this publicly, but inside it just makes you feel a

little bit superior to other people.

So as you came out this morning, you thought, well, at least someone on my street's going to church. At least someone's going. And there was just that little sense of self-righteousness as you came out.

And maybe, even worse, you went for a run before that. So you're just absolute self-righteous. I'm fit, and I'm spiritually fit, and out I go. Oh, marvellous.

[12:09] Can I say to you, if your experience of Christian faith makes you feel just that little bit superior to others, ladies and gentlemen, can I say to you as we come to this Easter week, you're in terrible trouble spiritually.

And you're a million miles from the real Christian faith. If there's any sense of superiority, you're dead spiritually. And it was exactly that sense of superiority, which was the Anglicanism that I was brought up with.

Exactly that. In church, Sunday morning, because actually we're just a little bit better. And it's a million miles from the real Christian faith. So, it's a deceptive contrast, but secondly, both these boys make an amazing discovery.

They both discover they're welcome with the Father. They both find it, but it's clearer with the younger son. Let's join him again. Can we look down verse 13? Let's have a look and see him there. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and got together and took a journey into a far country.

And there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he'd spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to the citizens of that country and went into his field to feed pigs.

[13:24] You see, what this young man finds, it's amazing, is that he's left home to be free, but he finds, actually, he's out of control. He's left home to be in control, and he's out of control.

The word wild means out of control. And he squandered his wealth in wild living. So, he wasted his life. Ladies and gentlemen, you only get one life, and he wastes it. And what this young man finds is just, yeah, not that freedom, but bondage.

And he finds himself isolated, and then he finds, oh, a famine's coming. And can I say, any life, Christians believe, that's without Christ, ends up in famine.

It ends in famine. But the famine's coming. He's out of control. He's not free. And then we have some of the saddest words in the whole Bible. Can we see the end of verse 16 there?

No one gave him anything. So, no job, no money, no friends. He finds that the people around him are takers, not givers. We're all one of two things in life, aren't we? We're drains or radiators.

[14:26] So, they're takers. And he's cosmically lonely. So, what does he do? What does he do? Let's see the halfway point in the story. Can we look down and see what he does? Verse 17. This is so important.

But when he came to his self. So, he comes to his senses, and he suddenly goes, oh, how can I have missed the obvious? How can I have done this?

Have I been so blind? Have I been so ungrateful? So, he comes to his senses about himself, and he starts to see himself as he really is a Jew in the pigsty. And he comes to his senses about his father, and he starts to surrender his precious delusions about independence.

And what does he long for? It's really interesting. You see in the passage, what does he long for? Let's look down and see that. Verse 17. And see what he longs for. But when he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired men of food to spare?

But I'm perishing here with hunger. I'll arise and go back to my father, and I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against him and against you. Do you get it? Ladies and gentlemen, he starts longing for home.

[15:28] That's what's happening here. One psychiatrist has said, children who don't experience a home experience a fundamental inability of attachment. But this home, what is home?

It's not a place. It's a relationship. He's longing for his dad. And home is the place where you belong and you're accepted. You see, up until then, all his relationships were conditional in the far country.

Just like the West End of London, where I worked for 30 years. We'll love you if you're young and you're rich and successful. If you're good looking, if you're slim, we'll love you. But if you aren't those things, we won't love you.

But at home, oh, ladies and gentlemen, at home, they love you anyway. They know all about you and they love you anyway. That's a real home. And he starts longing for home.

So what does he do? He comes to his senses and he surrenders his attitude to God and he does something which is so hard and millions never do it.

[16:26] They never do it. Do you know what he does, ladies and gentlemen? He swallows his pride. He says, do you know, I'm going to have to go home and I'm going to have to say sorry.

And some people, they're too proud. They'll never say it. But you never get to Easter week. You never get to Good Friday. You never get to the Christian faith unless you go, do you know, I need to say sorry.

And it's so hard. It's so hard saying sorry. I always delay endlessly. A previous Bishop of London said, London's biggest problem is BSE. We looked at each other. He said, yes, blame somebody else.

But actually, sometimes we've got to say, no, I need to say sorry. In marriage, just to say, can all the married keep their elbows in here? As I say these two phrases, I don't want to see elbows flying out. Elbows in. But in marriage, there are two phrases that are key to married life.

I'm sorry I was wrong and that's okay. I forgive you. And some people will never say it. But this boy, he says, you know, I don't just need my father's food. I don't just need his fellowship.

[17:31] I need his forgiveness. So what does he do? He comes out of the pigsty and can you imagine him rehearsing it? I've sinned against heaven and against you. And he starts heading for home and then what happens?

Let's have a look. Verse 20, as we look down. Can we see? Verse 20. Well, I'll go from 18. I'll rise and go back to my father. I'll go home. I'll say, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hard hands. And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father, you see his father's been watching for him.

He's been watching. His father saw him. And what does his father do? Does his father tap his foot, tap his foot and look out from the veranda and go, this better be good.

This better be good. What does his father do? As we look down, do we see, ladies and gentlemen, hold on to your seats. Let's see what he does. And he arose and came to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion.

[18:31] And that means a turning of the stomach. So I remember seeing a woman and her family had been washed away in the tsunami. And I looked at her face and the grief. And I felt my stomach turn.

And that's what's happening here. So the father's stomach turns. And he ran and embraced him and kissed him. Has anyone here ever seen the queen run?

It would be too awful, wouldn't it, to see the queen run. But actually, to see her break into a trot. In this culture, the hire, the nobleman never ran. But he doesn't care what the neighbors think. And he runs. And he probably ran across a couple of the fields that had been sold off for the life insurance. And he runs. And he runs. And this is amazing. It's very un-British. Because often the Brits would just shake hands. But no, the father kisses him and embraces him.

And ladies and gentlemen, what we have here is the key to happiness. Do you want to find happiness in life? Here's the key. You do three things. Number one, ladies and gentlemen, you come to your senses.

[19:31] You say, oh my goodness, how have I behaved like this? Secondly, you realize it's at home where you belong and you're accepted. And then the key to happiness, the key to peace in life, you then say, you say this to God, you say, oh God, I'm so sorry.

I'm sorry. Am I sinned again? I'm sorry. And as you do that, ladies and gentlemen, you feel God's embrace. And that is the heart of the human condition, the soul, and the Christian faith.

And you know, it's an amazing thing. In the morning, as we get up, the Bible, Christians read the Bible in the morning and it's like a mirror and you see your wrongdoing and you say, Lord, I'm sorry.

And you feel his embrace.

So would you please pray tomorrow morning I'll read my Bible because it's always a battle. But when I do, it's a lovely thing, but it's a battle to do it. But I see my wrongdoing. I say, Lord God, I'm so sorry.

And I feel his embrace. But you see, although this young man had forgotten about his father, his father hadn't forgotten about his him. His father was waiting and looking. His father was going, where are you?

[20:34] Where are you? Now what happens? He goes straight into the rehearsed speaks. Can we see the speech? Verse 21. Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. He gets halfway through and the father says, bring the best robe, a sign of honor.

Put a ring on his finger. A sign of authority. Put shoes on his feet. A slave didn't have shoes. A servant didn't have shoes. A son had shoes. Go and kill the fattened calf. A little boy was once asked in Sunday school, and who was not pleased to see the younger son come home?

And he shot up his hand and said, that would be the calf. But actually, what we've got here, ladies and gentlemen, is God doesn't treat us as we deserve. So there's some people here this morning and you're thinking, do you know, I might be here this Easter week, but actually, I'm not going near God.

Because if you go near God, he's going to drill your face into the ground. You go too close to God and he'll grind your face into the ground. And can I say, I don't know where you got that from, but the Bible tells us God is so generous.

He's so kind. Years ago, I was at home on my day off and I was teaching my brother's kids. They were four and two to play rugby. So I was down on the ground scrummaging with a four-year-old.

[21:49] You've got to start them young in my parents' sitting room. And I was there. And as I was doing that, the two-year-old, Patrick, got so excited, he picked up a large plant pot and he started to empty it all over my mother's lounge floor in order to make a pitch.

And when I next looked up, I'm not kidding, it was trashed. There was mud everywhere. And at that point, my mother came in and she walked over to her grandson. She picked up the plant pot. She put it on one side.

She picked him up. She kissed him. And she said, let's go and have lunch. And as she carried him out of the room, he looked over her shoulder and his older brother and I on the ground and he went like that.

You see, his grandmother knows what he's done. She's going to clear up the mess and she loves him anyway. And ladies and gentlemen, that's what it's like to be Christian.

God knows what we've done. He clears up the mess. He loves us anyway. It's just the most wonderful experience. He's so kind. He's so generous.

[22:48] But it's interesting, isn't it? This older brother, well, he wouldn't have been so good in terms of the welcome. I mean, it was fortunate, wasn't it, that the younger brother got seen by his father on the road, not the older brother.

Can you imagine what the older brother would have done? But amazingly, as we come to Palm Sunday, as we come to this week, ladies and gentlemen, the Bible says that Christians have a different older brother.

He earned everything. He earned the robe. He earned the ring. The Lord Jesus lived a perfect life.

You can look at his life on the Christian Explored course. He lived a perfect life. Well, look at Mark's Gospel. There's nothing you want to reject in the life.

But on Good Friday, having come into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, what did they do? They stripped him. They cast lots for his clothing. He didn't get the fattened calf.

He got hyssop and vinegar. And this older brother, as he dies on the cross, he says, the only way for you to be clothed is for me to be stripped. And the only way for you to get the ring is for me to lose them.

[23:50] And the only way for you to go home is if I, as I die on the cross, pay in death and blood for you to go home. It's not a cheap thing to be able to go home. The Lord Jesus Christ says, Rico, I'm paying for

your past, present, and future sin so that you can go home.

And actually, ladies and gentlemen, there's only one way to get to hell. The only way you get to hell is you trample over the cross of Jesus. Jesus blocks the way to hell and he says, I'm the true older brother.

I've died for you. I'm paying for you to go home. So please come home. I mean, this boy would never have left home if he'd known his father's generosity properly.

Come in, come home. And the payment for you to come home is colossal. And we'll look again at that on Good Friday. Please come back. But it's very interesting just as we close now.

Let's close now. But let's just think of the older brother for a moment. Why doesn't he go into the party? Why doesn't he say, oh, great, my brother's home. What stops him going home?

[24:58] How is it that he just says, no, I won't do it? And this is the message of chapter 15, verse 2, do you see? The Pharisees, the scribes, grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

Ladies and gentlemen, what is it that stops so many people from going home? Well, with this older brother, I wonder if you can hear what it is. Let's see it in verse 29. What is his weapon of rebellion against God?

Hold on to your seats. It's very shocking. Have a look down. Have a look. Verse 29. He says to his father, shouts at him as he has a row outside the party, look, these many years I've served you and never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me even a goat that I might celebrate with my friends.

What stops him going home, ladies and gentlemen, is his own goodness. He says, because I'm good, I control this, I make the rules, and there's nothing I need to be sorry for.

In fact, you, father, are lucky to have me here. Now, just to say, in Jewish culture, to have a row with your father publicly was massively serious. In the Old Testament, in a book called Deuteronomy, in Deuteronomy chapter 21, they actually executed children for publicly disobeying their parents.

[26:14] Well, it would sort the schools out, wouldn't it, don't you reckon? We've got a bit of a problem with Haskins 3, he'll be executed Thursday morning. But, sorry, you'll think I'm a fascist if I say this, I don't mean to do that, but what I am saying is this, I'm saying that it was so serious for people to see this boy publicly disobey his parents, and yet, his weapon of rebellion against his father is his own goodness.

And that was exactly my grandmother. What put me into the ministry was I watched my grandmother die from the 1st to the 8th of April, 1988. I watched her die, and she said repeatedly, because I'm a good person, God will accept me.

It was utterly heartbreaking. Please don't be like her. I mean, why did God send his son to die if your goodness is good enough?

But the weapon of rebellion is your own goodness. I'm a bit superior, I do my duty, I never have to say sorry to God. Well, it's tantalizing, isn't it, ladies and gentlemen, because actually, we don't know how the story ends.

We don't know if the younger brother was a flash in the pan, we don't know if the older brother went into the party. And the reason is, we have to finish the story. So keep coming to listen.

[27:35] The little Christian Explored course there on the 13th, 20th and 27th of April, those Monday nights, it would be lovely to have you there. Get the information to finish the story. Come back Good Friday, Easter Day, make it a priority.

Because the Bible amazingly says that actually as you keep listening, faith comes by hearing. You start believing it. But at the heart of faith is information, then you get the meaning, then you act on it. But you've got to get the information. Come back and do that. But for one or two others here this morning, they'll be going, do you know, I need to go home. I really do.

And if that's the case, then again, just keep coming and listening. Keep coming and listening. And what you'll find is the Lord Jesus starts walking off the pages of Scripture and putting his arms around you.

Let's pray together. Let's pray. Let's pray.