

THE GREATEST SHORT STORY EVER TOLD (2)

IN the last article I suggested that the story of the 'Prodigal Son' may not have been a parable but indeed more than a parable and that Jesus was telling of an actual event - an event He describes in exact detail.

Let us consider some of these details. Jesus depicts the repentance of the younger son on four vivid words: "he came to himself". We write our treatises and hold our dissertations and listen to our lectures and our psychological expositions upon Repentance, yet none of them is so clear and simple as those four words "He came to himself". A perfect description of what

Repentance is — “a change of mind leading to a change of life”. Do you recall how Paul was on trial before Festus, the Roman Procurator and Herod Agrippa 11, King of Judaea, as Paul made his defence Festus cried out “Paul, your great learning is driving you to madness. You are beside yourself”. If he was “beside” himself he was “outside” himself, out of his mind. But Paul was the only one in his right mind in that courtroom that day. For when a man is astray from God he is not in his right mind. So of the prodigal: he had not been in his right mind since that day he had left his father. There is a hymn which says “Lord, it is coming to ourselves When thus we come to Thee; The Bondage of Thy loveliness Is perfect liberty”.

This young man had experienced his years of “freedom” until he had become its slave. Like countless millions of us he had rejoiced in pleasing himself. My mother used to say when any of us children were defiant or disobedient, “You’ll please yourself until you vex yourself”. This young man was master of his own fate until he realized that he had become its slave. Sometimes we hear parents say of their children “They’re enjoying life while they’re young: they are only young once. They’re just sowing their wild oats”. But after the sowing comes the reaping, and then “What shall the harvest be?” The poet W.E. Henley gloried that “I am the master of my fate, The captain of my soul”, but as another poet writes, “Our lives are ours to make them Thine”. Only when he was ready to yield up his imagined lordship over himself did he find true liberty.

The Elder Brother

It is fascinating to speculate which passage in the Bible has been subject of most gospel messages. I think I should choose John 3:16 — “For God so loved the world...” Very close to it I should place this story from Luke 15. I find it remarkable, however that almost invariably when I have heard it preached from or have preached from it myself, the message has ended with the restoration of the younger son to his former state in his father’s house. Why then did Jesus not end there? What are the reasons why we have the elder brother introduced? We have the answers to these questions in the very first verse of this same chapter, where we read what sort of audience He was speaking to. Jesus was the perfect teacher who exactly fitted his teaching to the needs of his hearers — on this occasion the Pharisees, priests and elders and, on the other hand Tax gatherers and harlots — two totally opposite classes of people. On the one side the “holiest” and on the other the vilest of men and women. No greater contrast could be imagined than that mixed crowd who were listening. When Jesus spoke to a company they were not a mass, a crowd, nor even (to use his own figure) a “flock”. They were individuals, each a separate person, with his or her life, problems, sins, strengths and weaknesses. And Jesus spoke to each as though he or she were the only one present. Each separate one could say of his teaching “That means ME”. In the parables of “The Lost Sheep” and “The Lost Coin” Jesus had spoken to the sinners; now in the story of “The Prodigal” He speaks to all. The self-righteous and “holy” ones had not yet heard in these parables anything which could apply. (or which they applied) to themselves. Now in the story which they are to hear they will see themselves judged and condemned. Is it not obvious that Jesus introduces the elder brother, not as an artificial appendage to this matchless teaching but as a necessary consummation of what He is showing them of the love of God in its fullness. Thus He brings out the character of this elder brother, not by telling us what the man did but by his self-revelation through what he says to his father. We marvel at the amazing skill with which Jesus reveals the elder brother. He does not labour the man’s wickedness, but in the few words he speaks, his harshness and malice and self-righteousness are laid bare and open. He does not treat the self-confessed sinner as his brother but he says to the father “This son of yours” (N.E.B.). But gently yet firmly the father reminds him “This is your brother...” The elder brother was not in a position to say that the younger had “devoured his living with harlots”. How did he know? He had never had any communication with the young man while he had been away from home: he was not interested in him in the slightest: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Even his relationships with the father were on a purely business level, He says “All these years I have slaved for you” not as father and Son but as Master and servant — so much wage for so much work, no joy of service. The father points out the true state when he says “Son, you are ever with me and all I have is yours”.

We should like to think that this great story had a happy ending, sometimes preachers allow their imagination free scope in drawing their final picture of the story as a gloriously happy family reunion with all gathered round the festive board. Many readers of novels, especially the womenfolk, like to take a peep at the last chapter to see if the hero and heroine get married and "live happily ever after". But the Bible is not such a book of happy endings. It deals with the things of heaven and "the joys yet to be revealed; and it deals also with the things of earth, its sins and sorrows and sufferings and tragedies. It is realistic, showing life as it is. Many of its finest characters lived lives of suffering and died deaths of agony and tragedy, so that we say "Why do the righteous suffer and die in this way?" The question is as old as the Bible and is unanswerable by us until eternity dawns and "we shall know even as we are known". Saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs, the whole host of those who lived and died in the service of God, and above all, the Lord Jesus Christ testify by their lives and deaths that there remain many questions the answers to which will become clear only in eternity. There are things on earth, to which we have no answers not even in the Bible". It is not for you to know" Jesus told his apostles. Was the elder brother reconciled to his father and his brother? We don't know we are not told. We must leave it with God, Neither do we know what effects our preaching of the gospel, by word or life have upon those around us, but we must do it in faith and leave it with God. "He is faithful".

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