

The Heart of God

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Preacher: Chris Mitchell

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 4th of February 2001.

The preacher is Chris Mitchell. His sermon is entitled The Heart of God and is from Luke chapter 15 verses 11 to 31.

Lord, you're in the business of changing people and you long to see us turn back to you and to receive your love and forgiveness.

We know that you're sitting here, that you're present with us, that you're in this building. We pray that your spirit will teach our hearts that we'd be continued in this business of being changed by your spirit and that we'd move on only a little bit as we listen and think again about that story that you told 2,000 years ago of the lost son and of the waiting father.

In Jesus' name, amen. Also wanted to do a little advert. On the way out, we'll try and pass this out to as many of you as possible.

[1 : 18] This is just a little flyer that gives a little bit more information about us and about what we're hoping to do. It also comes with a little tear-out panel that if you want to be in a more personal sort of contact with us, if you want to hear what God is doing and how life is for us in Russia, there's a little segment there that you can, a little box that you can tick and you can receive newsletters.

If you're not internet challenged, you can receive our prayer points which we'll email out monthly and so on like that. So please have a look at that if it's relevant for you.

Either give it to myself or Andrew or post it into CMS. So that's that. I'd like to kind of turn our minds to that story that Jesus told, the one about the waiting father or the lost son, the prodigal son.

And I want to say, first of all, I love this story. It's one of my favourites that Jesus told. I think I'm not alone.

It's got such a happy ending, doesn't it? I mean, especially when you think about it in the culture of the day. Imagine it. Here was the son who had really offended not only his father but in fact the whole of his community.

[2 : 48] In the kind of culture of that day, by selling up the share that he had of his inheritance, he had really said to his father and to his community, basically you're not good enough for me.

In fact, it was almost really saying, I wish you were all dead because you would never get your inheritance until your father had died.

And it was like saying, what you have done to me as a community, what you have to offer me, it's not good enough for me, I want to take it now, I want to go. It kind of really rubbed their noses in it.

That's how bad it was. That's what he said to the people that loved and cared for him. But you know, the father in this story, Jesus says that the father still loved the son.

And while his son was away, the father, every day, we imagine, every day, the father is there standing outside and waiting for him.

[3 : 57] He had no often to go kind of looking for his son because he'd given his son his freedom. And honour and dignity and respect said that he wouldn't go back on that. But he still waits every day in case the son is going to come back.

And how do we know that? Because when he actually does come back, the father spots him and spots him a long way off. He's been there watching. He sees his son coming.

And then he does just another unthinkable thing in the culture of his day. He runs. It's kind of like Queen Elizabeth.

Her hat blows off and she runs off down the street after it, you know. It would just never happen. Same in those days. Older people kind of had the younger people to look after them.

You know. And an old man would never run. He'd never have cause to. And yet this man ran to show the son that he loved him.

[5 : 04] And what's more, I reckon it was to show the community that he had been a part of. That he, the father, loved the son and had forgiven him.

And wanted to embrace him and bring him back into the community. He was kind of making a statement to the whole of everyone that was watching him that this son was welcome and loved and forgiven.

It's an amazing story. And the best part about it all is that that is a picture of God. And that's why I love the story.

The father represents God in Jesus' story. And there's a picture of God. And so there is a message behind the story and it's the same Jesus told three stories.

You really want to bring this point home. There's a message behind these stories which says God loves it when sinners repent and turn back to him.

[6 : 11] That's the message. I wonder if you've really got that message. Have you ever heard that message really for yourself? Have you ever put yourself in the place of the son that returns to the father?

the son that was estranged who turns back and now finds a new and even more wonderful relationship with him.

And so we see the father in the story celebrating just as Jesus said in some of the other two stories. In fact, God celebrates.

Every time a sinner repents and turns back to him in this world there's a party thrown in heaven amongst the angels or that's what happened here.

The father throws a party and everyone's celebrating. I wonder when was the last time that you celebrated someone turning back to God?

[7 : 16] Can you think back when you had the last opportunity to celebrate the return of a prodigal son or daughter?

It's funny, isn't it? We celebrate all sorts of things in our culture, don't we? If you're an adult here, I'm actually getting old.

I'm hitting my midlife crisis at the age of 40. I went to St Andrews Hall and I discovered I was the oldest there, except for my wife, but we won't mention that. Then I went out, we've got someone else who's thinking you're going to Tadustown there from Sydney and they wrote us this really kind email, I'm sure it was meant to flatter us, but they kind of said, look, we understand that because you're more mature and so on, we're really glad that you're going out because you can be an older person there, a bit of a role model and I was thinking, gee, I'm not that old.

Anyway, when we get to be older, there are things that we celebrate, we celebrate the new house, you know, you've finally paid off the mortgage or you've got this new car and that's worth a celebration.

I mean, when you get even older, I've been watching my dad do this, you've got money in the stock market and you celebrate that windfall, you know, when your share's kind of, you know, in the right place at the right time.

[8 : 41] Or you've got the daughter that graduates from university or you've got maybe a grandson who's got a grandchild here, you know, can you remember the first grandchild?

Worth celebrating. If you're a bit younger, it might be the, you know, the first CD that you bought. I can remember my first vinyl record or the first boyfriend or whatever it was, you know what I mean.

What are the sort of things that you celebrate, I wonder? What are those sort of things that you can't wait to tell your friends about? And can I ask another question? Just how eternal are the things that you celebrate, the sort of things that you celebrate?

Because, you know, and Jesus said this in many other places, he said that it wouldn't be long before the Lord was going to return. In fact, he was going to return. And when that happened, the whole of the world as we knew it was going to be remade.

And in fact, that the things of this world would be consumed in a whiff. Things like the football park, where you celebrated the victory of Carlton or whatever it was, or your house, the car, or the office, or your bank, your stock market exchange, whatever, your CD collection, all of these are going to disappear.

[10 : 15] Not, can I add quickly, not because there's anything necessarily wrong with those things. Not at all. It's great to have a daughter who graduates from university.

It's great to have a new car, and it's great to celebrate a 60th birthday. It's not that there's anything necessarily wrong with these things. It's just that God has something even more wonderful in store for us for those who believe.

So I go back to my question. When was the last time that you had the opportunity to celebrate someone turning back to God? Last year, actually I can't say that, because this is now a new year, isn't it?

So I have to say a year and a bit ago, I had the chance to celebrate a friend of mine turning back to God. In fact, God used an invitation to a church service which I almost didn't send, because I didn't reckon she was going to come.

She kind of turned up, she rung me in fact, and I think she turned up once to church. She wanted to have her children baptised. And we kind of talked a bit about it and I began to show her what the promises meant.

[11 : 32] And basically she kind of drifted off and we lost track of each other. But six months later I was writing out some invitations to a service and there was an outreach service and it was actually a baptism as well because one of the families who were believing families were having their child baptised and they wanted all their non-Christian relatives to hear the gospel.

So they said could it be an outreach service? So I thought well this would be a great service to invite this girl to. And so I wrote to her and I thought I hope she doesn't think I'm too pushy.

And blow me down if she didn't turn up at the service. And she said later on that she cried through most of that service. I mean I was up the front and I didn't know about that.

In fact I didn't know about that until I was preparing the sermon and I asked her to tell me more about what happened for her. And so she started coming to church and we did Christianity in fact Jenny did Christianity explained with her to explain Christianity and the gospel.

And at the end of it there was an opportunity for her to make sure that she was in a relationship with God, with Jesus. And so she prayed with Jenny to confirm in her own heart that she belonged to him and that he was hers and that she was his servant.

[12 : 54] And it was just amazing. She told her story to me. She said that night she just lay in the pitch dark grinning. She couldn't stop grinning.

No one could see her but she still couldn't stop doing it. She knew that actually God could probably see that. It was just an amazing story. And we celebrated that.

She's now one of the pillars of Mill Park Anglican Church. And I bet God was celebrating it when she turned back to him.

Because you see it's really important to him. When people turn back to God it is the most wonderful thing for him to see. When he has that chance to show how much he longs to give forgiveness and love to those who have been wayward, who have gone astray from him.

As in fact the Bible tells us we all have. I wonder has that been your experience lately?

[14 : 03] Has it been your experience to see someone turn back to Christ? And has it been your experience to be part of the celebrations that that means on earth and in heaven?

You see the extent that you celebrate in fact may represent the measure of your concern for those who are lost, who are in fact wayward.

Can I illustrate it this way? If I lose a pen, I might look for it for a while and if I can't find it well then I'll go and pinch one of Jenny's or I'll buy one or something.

Never lend me a pen, okay? I'm terrible with pens. I don't mean to take them but anyway. So if I lose a pen, I might look for it but if it stays lost, it doesn't matter, I'll just go and get another one.

But if I was to lose a jumper that I really like, well then the search would be a lot longer because I'd want to find that jumper. And if as I once did, couldn't find my watch, which was an engagement present for me, well I searched high and low until I found that watch because it was really important to me.

[15 : 14] It was a matter to me. And I think that the extent that we search and the more that we have a concern for something, the longer it is that we will look to finding it and in fact the greater is the celebration that we have when we find it.

So I wonder if I can ask again, are you concerned? Are you looking out? As you go about your business, does your heart go out to those who are lost? Those who are effectively lost for eternity, lost to God and in a far off land as the sun was?

Are you looking out? Because some people aren't. Someone wasn't in this parable, were they? The story that Jesus told.

I wonder, could this other person be you? Or couldn't? I hope it isn't. Because do you know who the parables were really aimed at? They were actually aimed right at the beginning, you can read it at the beginning of the chapter, they were actually aimed at some good people, church going people in our days, the Pharisees, the righteous ones, the ones that were regarded as the kingpin of good people.

And these guys were muttering, you see, because Jesus was mixing with no good people. And in fact, when we reach out to others, it is a messy business. If we have people coming in church who don't know how to do things, those of us who know how to do things, that's a bit annoying sometimes.

[16 : 56] It's annoying if there are strangers in the church, because then you should go really and introduce yourself and make them feel welcome, rather than go and chat to your friends.

It's much nicer to go and chat to your friends. It's much nicer when you have a church budget that's got full of wonderful things that the church is going to do and you're a part of that.

It's harder when we see that bit of the budget that's there really for the outsiders or for mission or something that's not going to be just spent on you, because that's your hard won resources as a church, isn't it?

And it just bites that little bit more. It's hard. To reach out to lost people. And some people don't really care about the lost people.

See, the Pharisees never really cared about these people. And you know what the real tragedy was? The real tragedy, what the Pharisees never realised was that they were actually lost too.

[18 : 01] They too were sinners in God's eyes and they needed too repent. They also needed to repent and turn back to God and to be forgiven.

In fact, their situation was worse than that of the sinners because at least the sinners there listening to Jesus knew that they needed to repent, but the Pharisees didn't. So I'm wanting to challenge you today again.

Will you have a heart that loves the lost, who just longs for their return, who celebrates with God when they are found? Or will your hearts be like that of the Pharisees listening, these good Pharisees?

Or like the older brother who stood outside the party and said, all these years I've laboured for you. And the father says in effect, hey, it's not that I love you the less, but my son who was lost is now found, who was dead, is now alive and I've just got to celebrate.

Will your heart be like God's? Like Jesus's? Or will it be like the Pharisees? And I want to commend you as a congregation because I know that your heart is where God's heart is.

[19 : 20] I know we're not the only missionaries being supported by your congregation. I know that you are a church that reaches out to those who are not yet in the kingdom of God and I want to commend you on that because when you have a heart like that you've got God's heart and that's a wonderful thing and a good thing but the challenge is still there too.

I wonder if we can just bow and pray and ask God to search our hearts this morning. Lord, we acknowledge your presence and again we ask that your spirit will search our hearts.

Show us, Lord, any ways in which they are not like yours, where our concern doesn't match your concern. And Lord, show us how we can grow in the ways in which we do reach out to those who are yet to be found by you and your spirit.

Lord, give us a real heart, a new heart that is like your heart, that we would welcome the stranger, that we would go out to the neighbour, that we would spend time with people who don't know you, so that we can introduce them to you, the one who loves them deeply and is just longing to see them return to you.

Oh, Father, give us hearts like yours. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.