

## 208 Thanks for the prodigal sermon

After my last article, four people responded with encouragement and ideas. Thanks! One sent a very helpful sermon – not from the early centuries, but a modern American YouTube offering.

This morning, I started writing out Luke 16, but stopped dead in my tracks after the first four words: *Jesus told his disciples...* This emphasised what the sermon was saying.

So in my journey, in putting aside ‘what I’ve always been taught’, I’ve realised the importance of *context*, and my YT man looked at the whole of Luke 15 (lost coin, lost sheep and the mistitled ‘prodigal son’). He stressed verses 1–3:

Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering round to hear him. But the *Pharisees and the teachers of the law* muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.’ Then Jesus told *them* this parable: ... (*my italic*)

Unlike Luke 16, where Jesus was talking to his *disciples*, here he is aiming at the *Pharisees*. And who among us has never been pharisaic in our attitudes?! And isn’t that partly what gives the church such a bad name?

So I picture Jesus’ followers crowding round him, hanging on his every word, loving every minute. And, at the back, keeping their distance to avoid contamination, the prosperous, well-dressed Pharisees... muttering.

My YT man showed how Jesus’ sermon reeled the Pharisees in: ‘Yes’, they say, ‘the farmer would indeed rejoice over the lost sheep’, and ‘Yes, the poor woman would rejoice’, and ‘Yes, the father would rejoice when that awful, terrible SINNER came grovelling back to the father!’

They were probably saying, or at least thinking, ‘Thank God that we know what’s right, and we have served God properly all our lives.’ Then Jesus tells them about the older brother. Ouch!

I spent 45 years faithfully serving God, and thinking I was doing things right, but I wasn’t really happy in my faith. OK, I think that God graciously used me to persuade a few people that Jesus died for them, and they came to believe, but I always felt I had to sort of apologise for my faith.

It’s not about ‘getting it right’; it’s about rejoicing in the open-armed, welcoming love of God, even though I’ve still got all sorts of things wrong.

Don’t you love how, by the Spirit’s power, a given set of Jesus’ words can speak so powerfully in different ways to different people at different times!

I knew there was something special when I joined St Ed’s; I could see that there were people with differing views, but that there was clearly a party going on, so I joined in.

And now my main job is to welcome other people into this community on *whatever terms they are happy with*. So, if that’s tea, toys and toasted teacakes on Tuesday, they are very welcome. And it works; people are joining the party!