

LUKE 15:11-32

Hearing the voice of the father

I spent about 7 years during my twenties teaching drum lessons. It started off with one pupil a week, to 3, to 7, to 20, to over 50 - each week. Across well over 100 students and with lessons numbering in the thousands, I was always surprised how few people I came upon who didn't seem to be able to get a hang for drumming. "I'm not co-ordinated enough" is a common objection. But coordination can be learned, and I've always enjoyed getting on with the challenge of freeing people for music. Still some people have a stronger sense of internal rhythm than others. What is this mysterious thing we call a pulse, or rhythm - how do we know where "the beat" is, how do you stay in the groove? What IS the groove? While some people are more attuned to it than others, everyone needs guidance about how to "feel" the pulse, the tempo, the beat. Even at an advanced stage musicians improve with and enjoy the use of a metronome or click. One exercise I would use when a pupil was having a hard time "feeling" the beat, would be simply to tap them on the shoulder. "Feeling," and knowing what it feels like, is precisely what's needed for them. For others, struggling with the mix of coordination and feeling, I would guide their hands, as they held the sticks, into playing the right drums at the right moment. After a little while, their brain was catching up with their body, a neuron pathway was beginning to be formed, and a steady rhythm started to emerge.

No one has the perfect beat. There is a rhythm running through all music and all life that none of us can own or control – but the thing we can do is dance with it, receive it, play around it. And once we start to play, we never quite catch it but can at best enjoy it, honour it, bear witness to the beat.

Our journey of following Jesus is a bit like this, none of us - no matter what stage of life, of faith, no matter our inexperience or maturity - none of us ever is perfectly in tune with the ways of God, none of us has complete knowledge or comprehension of how to most faithfully follow Christ. This is why the notion of 'mystery' is so important to the Christian walk. The only thing we can do in response to this 'divine beat' is to keep listening, get familiar with it, learn the feeling and the sound of God speaking, accustom ourselves to the practices of listening prayer. We are learning to recognise the voice of God.

And so we're going to a story of two sons, and a father. Two sons, each who is listening to a different voice, and a father inviting them to pay attention to a different beat.

The prodigal son is the famous name of today's passage, it is a biblical story which is so powerful and well-known that at various points in history it has infused the popular imagination. Some of you may have heard or read it many times; for others this may be brand new. Jesus is telling a parable, his preferred vehicle for teaching. We quite like sermons and TED talks, lectures, books, youtube videos and speaking tours, Jesus didn't major on these kind of things but he did seem to have a thing for parables, across the gospels there are 56 parables told by Jesus, 29 of them here in Luke. Richard started last week engaging with the lost sheep, we've skipped ahead today to this third one, and next week to the lost coin – making up a linked trio of stories, told by Jesus.

In this parable, the younger son asks for his inheritance from his father, a disrespectful move that in the ancient middle eastern culture this story was being told in was about as effective as publicly saying to his father's face "I wish you were dead." Unthinkably, his father actually accepts this humiliation and obliges - and the son goes to a far land, has a great time, and then loses everything as a famine arrives. In all of this, the son is listening to a voice. Not the voice of his father - but his own voice. He's living in obedience to a story he is telling himself. "Get what you deserve – live the way you want to – leave the past behind and create a new future for yourself."

That is the voice of the younger son. That is the rhythm he is learning to play.

And then there is the older son. His younger brother leaves - but nothing changes for him. Life goes on as usual. He works for his father. A long time passes. What voice is he listening to?

Well, from the passage we don't hear anything about the older brother until after the younger comes home. So, let's return to the younger son, and come back to the older later. But keep the oldest in mind. The question will be - what voice is he listening to?

The younger son, out of time with the Father and drumming to his own rhythm, is in deep trouble - he has lost EVERYTHING. Uh oh. So he cooks up a plan. "Aha!" he says, verses 17-19: "How many of my father's hired hands have

bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

At last, some clarity! He's finally able to admit to the reality of his own situation. He broken! But look which voice is steering this situation. It's the same motivation which initially moved him to ask for his inheritance early which is behind this idea now. "How can I best look after my own future?" This is a strategic question, it's political self-service. It's not particularly a bad question, he'd be stupid not to consider this as a real option - but my point is, he's still out of time and out of tune. He's listening to the wrong voice.

So off he heads, back to Dad. "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." (20) This is not the proper thing to do - the only right way to understand what has just happened here is that this is an outrageous expression of love, of abundant grace. The father who was publicly dishonoured and disowned by his own son, does the exact opposite thing that he ought to have.

The son is still learning to play. He doesn't really sense the pulse, the timing, the beat; he's a novice, and he's got himself into a tough place because of it. The son needs to experience the guiding, rhythmic hand of the Father, to provide the space for him learn the pulse and get in time with the rhythm. And so his father *runs* and hug him; *runs* through the village; *runs* because redemption is hanging in the balance; runs because *he doesn't* want another worker, runs because he wants *a son*.

The son, already having received a more shocking welcome than he could have hoped for, begins his prepared speech, the last remaining dregs of insight and wisdom that his own voice has to offer. This is his last hope. This is his moment to secure what remains of future hope for himself.

But his father ~~disrupts~~ (interrupts?) him. He knows his son doesn't quite have the feel & needs some guidance. Actually, he loves his son - but it's time to change the narrative. He disrupts. He intervenes. He doesn't allow his son the chance follow that disconnected rhythm any longer.

See the difference between the practice speech of v.18-19 and the actual performance v.21. The son literally doesn't get to say the last bit, his request or

demand: “treat me like one of your hired hands.” That was the best he could do in his own strength, the only outcome the younger son can imagine according to the logic and power of the beat he is still moving to.

So now the Father at last can show the right way to play. The son had access to this the whole time, his father’s voice has been there his whole life. But all external circumstances have got him now to the point where he has to be guided... he can’t pretend any more – he’s out of options, and his destructive autonomy has been stripped away.

The father speaks to identity v.22: ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. – symbols of relationship, belonging, speaking to his true identity as a son, a loved child. The father subverts the son’s self-serving narrative with the truth of who he is, his voice ringing clear and true. “This is my son.” And for the first time, the son is learning to hear.

Which voice are you listening to as you go about life? Is it the voice of you-in-control? Or are you allowing the Father’s voice to ring clear and true in your own life?

The youngest son finally starts to hear the voice of his father, and he is guided into a new kind of way of being... the art and rhythm and movement of celebration, v.23-24: “get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

The second part of this parable concerns the oldest son. He’s not happy about the latest turn of events. In contrast to his brother, he has not misspent his inheritance, publicly dishonoured his father, prioritised his own future in disconnection from others. No, almost opposite, and so we hear him raging at his father in v29-30: “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.” He’s been faithful, a good worker, consistent... but he’s dripping with resentment. He sees the youngest sons reception as patently unjust, and he feels unappreciated, looked over, deserving of more.

Interestingly, we don't actually get to see what happens at the end of this parable. Take a look - we are left waiting. The older son initially stays outside the party – he doesn't want a thing to do with it – and just like for the younger, the father then subverts the expected social order and GOES TO his son, despite the facts that in BOTH cases the sons are acting in ways that have publicly disgraced the father (the older son v.28 “became angry and refused to go in” is an act of defiance to his father much like the younger son's requesting his inheritance early). So the Father, in the midst of the celebration, leaves the party where he is host and “goes out and began to plead” with his eldest. (v28). In the other parables in this chapter, and in the case of the younger son, after the lost being found, there is a celebration. It's a pretty key point! But by now the older brother has shown his true colours, we can hear his rhythms and he's badly out of time. Here he stands, outside the party – he is LISTENING TO THE WRONG VOICE. The father pleads with him; he listens to him; he explains the importance of celebrating. But it's not an apology; it's an invitation.

And will he respond? Will the oldest son, who we now see is also “out of time” accept the guiding hand of his father, allow himself to be guided to a better and truer beat?

WE DON'T KNOW! We don't see the outcome! That's the end of the story!

And that's because, it's a loaded story. Jesus is now directly addressing the Pharisees – they are the oldest son. And Jesus is saying, both sons are listening to the wrong voices, and both are unable to hear the true voice of their father. But the father extends the invitation to a deeper rhythm and true identity to both. Both are welcome in the father's house.

What invitation is God offering to you today?

This is a tale of two sons.

One rebellious, foolish, and scheming... Out of time.

But coming to his senses. Lost.

One hardworking, rule abiding, self-righteous... Also out of time.

Struggling to feel the pulse.

But the outstretched hand of invitation is there for him, too.

Where are you in this?

God has called us his own.

You might have lost a sense of direction in your life. But God's hand is outstretched.

You might have lost all faith in church, Christianity may have become too burdensome to you. But the grace of God is outrageous, unbecoming, radical. God is running through the village to you, disrupting *your* story with *his* abundance... with affirmation, with forgiveness, with joy!

It might have been so long since you've tasted the tender mercies of God's grace that you are dried up, thirsty, parched. You've worked hard, you've sought to be light in the midst of darkness, but now you find yourself worn down and worked up, struggling to remember the joy of salvation that once was yours but seems to have been washed away by the weariness of day-to-day life. These years just keep rolling over...

So, where are you?

Great are you Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we long to praise you.

Our search for you takes us in all wrong directions, lost in the strange places, left outside in the dark. But you awaken us, stirring us to the praise that brings us joy.

Great are you Lord. You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.