

Sermon on Sunday 27 March 2022 online by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Luke 15. 12

"Father, give me the share of the property that belongs to me."

We had the first half of the parable of the Prodigal Son two weeks ago. We heard the second half this morning.

There's an old tale about that wonderful footballer George Best, one of a long line of gifted young men like Paul Gascoigne and Wayne Rooney whose unstable private lives have always left their sporting brilliance balancing precariously over an abyss of self-destruction.

When George moved on from Manchester United in search of the playboy lifestyle and easy money of US soccer, many of his fans felt betrayed. But a fan of his, who worked in room service at a luxury hotel, was terribly excited to hear that the great George would be staying the night. And he could hardly contain himself when the call came to deliver a snack to the star's suite.

As he laid the caviar on the table, and popped the cork on the vintage Krug champagne, he caught a furtive glimpse of George's current girlfriend, who just happened to be Miss World, relaxing in the bath. And as George took a long draft of champagne and offered him a generous tip from the pile of banknotes on the bedside table, the young fan forgot his professional discretion and blurted out to his idol, 'George, where did it all go wrong?'

For the prodigal son, we can ask the same question. Where did it all go wrong? And I would answer this. Not when he was forced into a dirty, low paid job to avoid starvation. Not when he ran out of money. Not when he fell in with bad company in that distant land. It went wrong as soon as he began to think of 'his share' of the family property as something he could pick up and take away with him.

It's ten years now since my mother died, and my sisters and I faced the task of clearing and selling the family home. We'd moved there when I was a few weeks old, it had been 'home' to us for 50 years, a familiar place we could always go back to, warm and welcoming and full of fond memories. Losing the house felt very much like a second bereavement.

And I remember the chill in my heart when I got the cheque from the executor a few months later and took 'my share of the family property' and paid it into the bank. Because I knew that all that was really valuable in my home and family could not be divided up and turned into a bank draft.

But that is what our young man in the parable wants, and gets. No surprises that it all goes wrong. The minute he takes 'his share', he's already lost everything that is really valuable.

'I want my share now'. Life doesn't work like that - even if our demand were honest. Because when we say, 'I want my share', how often do we really mean, 'I want more than my share'. Isn't that what the whole of our consumer society is based on? I should have more. And if I can't afford it, I'll borrow, or I'll just help myself to it anyway. As long as

anyone around me has something I haven't got – I should have it. It's only my share.

And it's not just individuals, is it? As we become more and more anxious about the world's natural resources, and the world's ever-shrinking capacity to cope with the demands the human race is putting on it, nation after nation steps up to demand 'its share' of the world's wealth, with the ones who already have the most usually shouting the loudest. And I do love that old Native American proverb: 'We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children'. That is already becoming a much bigger debt crisis than anything our Central Bankers talk about. Even across the generations, we need to learn to share.

'I want my share'. But the last thing we have in our minds when we say 'share' is 'sharing'. It's about having and keeping for ourselves.

Of course, the parable of the prodigal son isn't about 'things'. It is about God's love. Luke tells us that Jesus tells this parable 'to the Pharisees', to the judgmental ones who do not understand how God's love reaches out to sinners. They want to keep it all for themselves, an exclusive reward for their faithfulness to the law.

But God's grace cannot be measured and carved up. The young son may take his share of God's bounty and turn his back on him and squander it, but when he returns the very same share is there waiting for him. And if the elder son, the faithful one, whose anger and confusion is the core of the second part of the parable, feels that he has somehow lost out, then he has misunderstood.

In the return of the prodigal, in the restoration of a whole family, the other brother's share of God's grace is not



diminished, it is increased, because the sum of joy in God's household is greater, and all that is the Father's belongs to him - 'Son, all that is mine is yours'. And with the return of his brother, that "all" suddenly got bigger - if only he in turn can have the grace to see it.

Where does it all go wrong? Whenever we believe that nothing is really valuable to us unless we own it all for ourselves. Real wealth is not what we own, it is what we share - and that is as true of God's love as it is for any other gift that our loving creator has given us.

Give me my share of the property that belongs to me? No, Lord, teach me that all the good things you give are already mine - because they belong to everybody.

Amen