

The Lost Son's Mother **Sermon on Luke 15: 11-32**

I can picture her so clearly.
Devastated.
Sitting at a window.
Waiting.
All her hopes and dreams had gone.

It had seemed ok. Their family life was fine.
The three men had worked in the fields and seen to the farm. And she had done her share in the house.
Her husband wasn't much of a talker.
And sometimes she could have done with a bit more of his attention. But she'd got used to it. At least he was a caring father, and a faithful partner. Never loud or violent. Always quiet and gentle.
There was not a great deal of communication. No.
They were so used to each others' presence that they just got on with life... - every day.

He and the boys seemed to get on really well. Again: not so much in terms of talking, but they worked together, and seemed to like, if not enjoy each others' company.
They ploughed together, sowed, harvested and took care of the cattle. They worked from morning till night.

But one day her younger son Benjamin had said to his father: "Give me my share of what we have. I want to stand on my own feet."
Her sons' father did not say much. He divided the cattle and gave the younger son his share.
Benjamin took his part, sold it, received much money for it, and left.
He gave no idea of where he was going.
He wanted to be his own master and enjoy life.

After he'd gone it was as if he'd taken the happiness of the whole family with him.
There hadn't been much of a farewell.
The deal between the men had been made before she even became aware of the situation.
Bags were packed, plans made, when she entered the scene.
When she'd grasped what was going on, it seemed too late.
She was speechless. Surprised. Shocked.

The unseen mother had to put up with what they'd done.
The unheard mother of so many years had now no voice to speak, no words to utter, no pleas to make...
Could it all have been different, if she had been able to say something?

But the only one who spoke in the family, had always been Ben. He'd communicated with them all, and for them all. His departure left the others kind of mute.

He had always been the one who networked between them all. He was the one who suggested a joint meal, an evening in the garden, a trip to Jerusalem, a new investment for the small family business... He was the one who occasionally said: I think it's about time that we sit together and talk...

With him gone, a deathly silence had come over the other three.

Ruben was more like his father. Not a man of many words either. And with Ben gone they just went about their daily chores wordlessly.

To sit there at mealtimes in silence, broke her heart.

Without Ben she seemed to be unable to break the silence. Her partner for communication had gone... her counterpart in a way... There was no longer someone to throw the ball to and get it back from...

She started avoiding the time in which the three of them were together. She quietly prepared the men's meal, put it out on the table and hid in her armchair near the window.

...always hoping and praying that Ben would come back.

There at the window she turned into a quiet memorial, reminding the other two with what they had done, or better: with what they had not managed to prevent. How many mothers, she sometimes wondered, were sitting at similar windows, mourning over losses that could have been avoided? ...suffering from the mess that men had made?

She didn't want to be unfair and put all the blame on husbands and sons. This would not have been right.

The society of their days was to blame. The laws. The traditions. Maybe the Roman occupation that made people weak and filled them with fear.

The courage to change things, the ambition to make a difference had vanished long ago. People were not inventive or creative anymore. They had given up hopes and dreams. They just saw to their own needs and made sure they somehow kept their heads above water...

They were living in a culture of oppression and poverty. The major part of the population was starving or being enslaved.

Their family was lucky. Their farm was still prosperous. They had their own slaves and day labourers.

Everywhere in those days it was usual that the older son was the heir of the farm. He would inherit the whole estate. And also, as usual, in all families the younger son got his legacy paid out... usually in cash... and had to find a living elsewhere.

The younger son did not have a choice... unless they had the guts to do the unusual and try to see if the farm would maybe feed them all.

All younger brothers got their part of the inheritance paid and left home.

Sometimes they could buy themselves a piece of land. Sometimes they could marry into a family. But it wasn't easy.

And Ben wouldn't have needed to do it so soon. Usually you waited until the father died. So, why on earth had her younger son left her so early and so suddenly?

She was out of her mind with fear and worry.

All of them knew that not many younger brothers managed to make a successful living. Constant droughts and famines drove up the price of corn and bread, and within an instant those who didn't own property found themselves beggars. She knew this reality so well. And she was mad with fear thinking of all that could happen to her boy...

She could not forgive Ruben and her husband for letting it happen. And she could not forgive herself for having not spoken sharply against it.

Of course women didn't have much to say. But there were exceptions. Even in her religious traditions. She knew the stories of Rahab and Deborah, of Rizpa and Judith. There were some women who'd been making a difference to their families and peoples by doing the extraordinary. She could have, too, had she only dared to do once what she believed was right.

I could picture her so clearly, the mother of the "lost" son, when we read the story in which she is not mentioned at all, in the women's Bible study.

A poem which speaks of her had opened our eyes.

...made us ask.

Where are the women in the story?

This man must have had a wife!

These sons must have had a mother!

It makes a difference to a story, when you include the women. Can you feel it?

God may be a father, but he also is a mother!

And what the father in our story does is more likely something that at all times in the history of humankind the mothers would have done.

This father shows himself as somebody not thinking in clear, logical, legalistic terms. He seems to be thinking in terms of loving care rather than in what is officially right or wrong.

The father who then welcomed back his younger son is different from the man who'd let him go.

Time had changed him.

Maybe pain and sorrow, too.

Maybe also the silent mourning of his devastated wife...

When the father recognised a starving stranger in rags as his son, he ran as fast as he could to greet this boy who he had lost; ... not minding at all the rules of custom and respectability.

The abundance of happiness made him react absolutely and entirely emotionally. The joy was so great that there was no time to reflect or weigh up. The old father hugged his son, put his arms around him and kissed him, before exchanging one word.

And up there at the window a heart leapt for joy. The waiting had not been in vain.

Unnamed, unseen she now enters the story.

Speaks the words that should have been spoken so much earlier. Hugs her men and celebrates with them.

And while the fatted calf is killed, she goes to fetch the homemade bread and wine with which they welcomed the son who they'd missed so much.

Losing and finding are the words which the father used later; and they stood for "being dead and being alive". They all were now alive: music and dance, clothes and a ring, new bonds and rights, singing and rejoicing.

The joy and happiness of being together had the first and the last word!

The love of the father shown in this story is absolutely unconditional. It is simply what it is.

The many abundances in the story, the hugs and kisses, the joy, the feasts, the food and drink... they all point towards the joy of life which God has always wanted for his people.

What happens here is grace – mere grace – nothing more and nothing less.

What became of the older son is not told in the story. Was he able to agree with his father – and his mother? Did he manage to accept the return of his brother?

Questions which Jesus leaves open.

Jesus, the storyteller and teacher leaves it open to his audience to answer, and he leaves it open to us...

Recall the story...

Converse with each character:

the younger son,

the angry older son,

the father unable to communicate,

the heartbroken unseen mother...

With whom would you identify most?

Why?

Whoever you are, God invites you to claim your inheritance:

You are always with me. All that is mine, is yours:

goodness and grace, boundless mercy and abundant love.

Amen.