

# The Prodigal Son

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This story has been told many times from our pulpits. Don't we all know it word for word having heard it from our childhood. It has also been interpreted in various ways.

When I read it again this time it spoke to me in quite a different way.

This is a very human story. It is an ancient story, but it is a story that is being enacted in our law courts day after day.

It is a family squabble, a family confrontation over inheritance issues among other things.

Does that sound familiar? Gina and her children being the ones grabbing the headlines at present.

But every day the family court is dealing with family related problems, be they divorce, settlement of entitlements, custody of children, access visits and so on.

Family differences can be so very hurtful as they go so deep and touch us at our very core.

Having one daughter a Senior Social Worker and one a Lawyer specialising in Family Law, we know just how complicated, difficult, hurtful and emotional family crises can be.

We also know how vulnerable people working in this area can be. Very upset and angry clients don't always behave rationally.

For both our girls their professional working name does not appear in any telephone directory.

Let's look at our story.

Be honest – whose side are you on when you hear this story?

I have always felt very sorry for the elder son.

"It's not fair!" – we've all heard that from our own children.

It hurts to feel you are not appreciated.

It hurts when what you do is taken for granted and no appreciation expressed.

I wonder how the mother in this story felt. Of course we're not told.

So what is this story about?

It is about forgiveness. The father could forgive his son, the son could not forgive either his brother or his father.

And that's as true today as it was when this story was written.

Families are torn apart when forgiveness does not happen.

Lisa once said to me, I have learned two things about families in my work.

"One is how spiteful, nasty, mean and unforgiving people can be.

On the other hand how generous and supportive others can be."

I decided to take a look at other family stories in our Scriptures.

Our Old Testament contains some absolute "shockers" as well as an occasional good one. You only have to go to Genesis chapter four to find the first family murder when Cain kills his brother Abel.

This poses the question – Are there actions that are unforgiveable?

I want to look at several Old Testament stories.

Firstly – Abraham and Sarah.

Sarah was growing old and had been unable to bear a child for Abraham.

So she suggested Abraham take her maidservant, Hagar that she might bear a child for her. Surrigacy is not new.

I imagine, Abraham, being a typical male, did not need to be asked a second time and in due course Hagar became pregnant.

Once she was pregnant Hagar became quite nasty and treated Sarah with contempt, sneered at her childlessness. Not a happy family!

Hagar bore a son and named him Ishmael.

In due course, Sarah, in her old age was told she would have a child. Although she laughed at this possibility she did become pregnant and gave birth to a son and named him Isaac.

One day as Sarah watched the two little boys playing together she came to the decision that Ishmael must never ever inherit Abraham's legacy.

She insisted that Abraham must send Hagar and Ishmael away.

She watched while Abraham gave Hagar bread and a water skin.

She watched while Abraham placed the child on Hagar's shoulder and sent them out into the desert.

Sarah Maitland, a fiery English feminist theologian whom I have heard speak in Australia, re-imagines this story in her wonderful book, "Angel and Me"

She has Sarah say these words –

"Even if it were true that Hagar had behaved badly, had been bold and brassy and held her mistress in contempt, even if it were true, there was something truer: no woman, no woman ever, whatever she has done, should be given bread and a skin of water and sent out into the desert with her small child."

No woman ever.

Perhaps Sarah could never forgive herself.

The second story of Abraham and Sarah occurs when Abraham, at God's command, takes Isaac his son to the land of Moriah to sacrifice him on the altar of stone. We know that at the last minute a ram was provided and Isaac was spared.

When he returned home we are told he took his servants and young men and went to dwell in Beersheba.

It would appear that Sarah did not go with him. We are told she lived at Hebron in the land of Canaan and died aged 127 years.

Again Sarah Maitland's words –

“It was not that she could not forgive him, or even that she could not forgive herself. It was that she had nothing to say to a man who believed that God had blessed him for being willing to kill her child.”

Nothing to say to a man who was prepared to kill her son.

In modern terms that is child abuse at its most extreme.

The irony is that when we look at the story of Christianity in the New Testament, it is based on the same premise – A father willing to sacrifice his son.

Shouldn't that disturb us? Particularly as we approach Easter-how do we deal with it?

It certainly concerns many progressive scholars who completely reject this notion of sacrificial atonement.

Now the story of Jacob and Esau – twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah.

Esau came in from the fields tired and hungry to find Jacob in the kitchen cooking soup. It smelt delicious. Esau asked for some to eat as he felt so famished he would die if he didn't eat. Jacob agreed but only on the condition that Esau give to Jacob his rights as the firstborn son. Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of soup.

When Isaac grew old and blind he wished to give Esau his final blessing before he died. We know what happened. Rebekah cooked the meal, covered Jacob's arms and neck with goat skins and sent him in to his father pretending he was Esau, and he received his father's blessing.

When Esau found out what happened Jacob fled for his life to Haran.

There he tended Laban's flocks, married his two daughters and became very wealthy.

After many years he decided to return home with his family and his flocks and all his household.

He sent servants ahead to tell Esau he was returning home and they came back with the message that Esau was on his way to meet him accompanied by 400 men.

This really put the wind up Jacob so he prepared a strategic plan.

He chose as a present for Esau 200 female goats and 20 males, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys, and 30 milch camels and their colts.

He placed a servant in charge of each herd and their instructions were to go off, one herd at a time, leaving a space between each herd and present these as a peace offering to Esau.

Jacob, accompanied by his household followed with Jacob in the lead followed by his maids and their children, followed by Leah and her children, with Rachel and her son Joseph, [the favourite], last of all.

As he neared his brother Esau we are told Esau ran to meet him, embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept together.

That's forgiveness. That's reconciliation.

Writing this has made me recall the memories of "Sorry Day" – how important it was for our indigenous people to hear the word "sorry".

Many tears were shed that day.

Perhaps until they heard that word they could not begin to forgive us and allow true reconciliation to begin.

Jesus, the Wisdom Teacher, understood the importance of forgiveness.

