



Prayers & Readings for this week

- ☐ Please continue to remember Christine Herbert in your prayers; she is still in hospital and being well looked after
- ☐ Rev Piyal Mondal, a pastor from India whom we've supported in various projects from Bibles to food ministry is in hospital. Pray for this good brother in the Lord!
- ☐ Pray for our church board that we may have wisdom to consider how to safely begin services after the summer months
- ☐ How can we pray for you specifically? Please let us know by text or email.
- ☐ Give thanks to the Lord for the good things he has in store for us!

Monday	Reading Acts 21:1–26 Pray for Wendy Bailey & family
Tuesday	Reading Acts 21:27–40 Pray for Theresa Baker & family, and Oliver
Wednesday	Reading Acts 22:1–29 Pray for Val Batty & family
Thursday	Reading Acts 22:30–23:22 Pray for John & Ann Beattie & family
Friday	Reading Acts 23:23–35 Pray for Vivienne Best and family
Saturday	Reading: Catch up Pray for Mark, Joanne & Tom Bolton
Sunday 2nd August	Reading Acts 24 Pray for Audrey Bolton & family

Good morning to you all. It is usually on Thursday mornings that I sit down to write this little communique. I count it a privilege to be able to try and keep contact in this way. I try to say something that will encourage most people. Here we are at the last Sunday of July and it is now four months since our lockdown began. The status quo has not changed that much, but the church board is beginning to plan how we might safely begin again, after the summer months, some more church services.

Sadly, there seems to be 'a long haul' aspect to this pandemic. There will be no easy fix, but we believe there is a way forward. What we have are severe restrictions, but many people experience lots of restrictions in life. And so, with this in mind, we will endeavour to turn the ship around and go in the right direction. We will need the Lord's help – and, along with wisdom and a strong spirit, we can once again truly meet the needs of people in our church and community. This pandemic has reminded us how fragile life can be. The human spirit, strengthened by the Spirit of the living God, has often done the impossible. The Bible stories found throughout the entire Bible are testaments to those who have risen above their challenges.

I think of Joshua's words to the people of Israel to 'be strong and courageous'. Nehemiah was 'cupbearer to the King' and in no position to do what his heart told him, but with the help of God and good people, and despite so much opposition, he did rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and repair the gates burned with fire. Peter was a mere fisherman *and* an arch-leader of the early church; the mathematics may not add up, but he had 'been with Jesus'! Hebrews chapter 11 lists many whose faithful, dauntless sacrifice was such that '**the world was not worthy of them**', showing how with faith, courage and endeavour they did the seemingly impossible in their day.

We must not settle for anything less than **the best for the Lord** and his kingdom. 'Mediocre', or 'that will do', and 'what's the point' should never be part of our vocabulary or way of life. Though we have risen to the challenges of the past few months, there is something hopeful, helpful, and wholesome that we can now



set our sights upon. Indeed, dare I say it; it was in the very middle of such difficulties that the Church of Christ came into being. Its first three centuries were set against impossible odds and opposition.

Inspired, we must be. Optimistic - absolutely! Ministry to all people is our 'bread and butter'. That is where our fulfilment lies. This must be our direction in the coming months. **Grace and Peace to all!**

Reading: Luke 15: 11-26 Message: What Kind of Father is God?

The names we give things matter, don't they? They count. You only ever learn how many people you have issues with when you're trying to think of a name for your child. Because how we name something determines how we see it, how we feel about it, what we think about it. And we see that so clearly in our passage for today from Luke 15. The chapter is a set of three parables which Jesus told in response to the well-founded accusation of the religious leaders who opposed him, that He welcomes sinners and eats with them. The third of this series is undoubtedly one of the most famous parables Jesus ever told. And like most of His stories, He doesn't give it a name. Although most of us will have grown up calling it the '**parable of the prodigal son**'.

Prodigal means 'reckless with our resources'. One scholar defines it as 'spending until we have nothing left'. And so, at first glance, this seems a good name for the parable. Until we read it, and realise this name would only tell a fraction of the story, because as we'll see, by that definition, the true Prodigal: the One who truly gave until He had nothing left to give; the One who truly poured Himself out in reckless extravagance, wasn't the younger son at all, but the *father*, who points us and draws us to Our Father.

So what about the parable of the Lost Son? That seems a better fit - as we'll see, the younger brother went as far from home as he possibly could, in every sense he possibly could. But again, this name misses the point, because there isn't just *one* lost son. The elder brother *also* fails to recognise, and refuses to see, who his father truly is, what his father is truly like. He is just as lost as his younger sibling. And so: what about the parable of the Lost Sons? Both need help, both need rescue, both need to be brought into the embrace of the father. But even then, we're still looking in the wrong direction. We're still looking at the wrong character. Because this story isn't about the *children*, in all of their lostness and brokenness. This story is about the Father. *Our Father!*

For with our church family in Brooklands, you've joined us in the middles of a series about the **Lord's Prayer**. And today we're seeing just what kind of Father our God is - as pastor Timothy Keller puts it: '**God's life-changing reckless grace is our greatest hope**'.

Jesus says, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them". When I was in school, a million years ago, we studied the poetry of Robert Frost. I'll never forget one called 'The Death of the Hired Man'. In it a farmer comes home from market to be greeted by his wife who tells him that an old man named Silas has come by looking for work. As the story unfolds, we learn that Silas has a long relationship with the couple - he turns up periodically, insisting that *this* time he's going to be everything they could ever ask for in a hired help. But always, just when they need him the most, he leaves them in the lurch, convinced that he has a better offer somewhere else. The husband is angry- 'When was I ever anything but kind to him?' he says, 'But I'll *not* have the fellow back'.

In our 21st century society in the West, we can find it hard to identify with the deep seriousness of this Bible parable. We can be a little numbed to what's happening, because we see it and experience it so very often around us. An estranged child ventures off into the big bad world, throwing their life away in what we *know* is likely to be just one disaster after another, one train-wreck after another, one plane crash after another. Only ending when the money runs out, or their partner runs out. It's such a common story today that we can so easily just slot *this* parable into the same category, and thereby miss just how deeply offensive it is, just **how incredibly revolutionary is this story of Jesus** in so many different ways. For the younger son to demand his 'inheritance' in this way he was effectively and unashamedly saying he **wished his father was dead**. *Dad, I can't wait for the day you die, because all you are to me is a walking, talking cash machine, and I want you to pay out right now.* In the ancient Near East, there was no bond greater than the family unit. The Law of Moses (Deut. 21: 18-21) had numerous incredibly harsh penalties for children who dishonoured their parents in the way this son was dishonouring his.

The property would have been divided into three equal shares. The elder brother would have had the right of the firstborn and would have taken two shares, and his younger sibling would have taken the remaining third. The father was left utterly dependent upon his eldest son; he would have been the laughing stock of the community; he could even have been seen as violating the Law of Moses, which insisted that land had to be kept in the family unit, because it wasn't their land at all - they were only stewards and trustees of God's land.

And yet, in his scandalous love for his son, the father accepts it all. In his reckless grace, he bears it all. In his unfailing kindness, he suffers it all. Because that's the kind of Father *our* God is. One who doesn't dominate, who doesn't bully, who doesn't force. One who

Pastor Karl Stanfield

0161 998 9863

07515 104216

Drawing people closer to God:
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Sunday 26 July 2020

Pandemic-times Update

Brooklands Nazarene Church

loves us enough to let us choose paths that damage us, and damage each other, rather than putting us in chains and forcing us to walk the path He knows to be for our good. He loves us with what the theologian Thomas Oord calls an 'uncontrolling love'. But that's not the *only* insult in the story; it's not the *only* time the father is shamed and abused and taken advantage of. Because after the younger son throws himself away in what Dr Luke so politely calls 'wild living' (Lk 15: 13) he stumbles home. There are folks worshipping with us today who are painfully familiar with the 'favourite child syndrome'. There may well be brothers and sisters worshipping together right now who have just looked at one another and pointed the finger. This older brother is lost with a skewed and warped vision of who his father is, and what his father is like. And yet once again it's the father who makes the move. It's the father who extends the welcome. Because that's the kind of Father *our* God is. Of all the titles God could have been assigned here, it is Father – He chose *Father*!