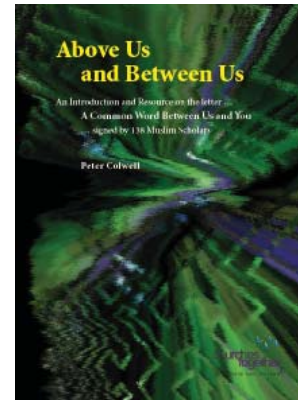


The Unconditional Love of God in Christ



Reading: Luke 15.11–15

Along with the parable of the Good Samaritan, the story known as the Prodigal Son is one of the Jesus' best known and best loved parables. Many commentators have stated that Jesus was a master story teller who at an instant could capture and provoke the imagination of his hearers.

The parable of the Prodigal Son neatly summarises the Christian belief in the unconditional, forgiving love of God in Christ. We might regard the errant son as selfish and ungrateful. He appears self-indulgent and only concerned with his own comfort, enjoyment and fulfilment. It is this self-centredness that leads him to demand his share of the inheritance and he leaves for a far-off country for his 'gap year' of indulgence!

But it is the manner of his return that provides the essential message of this parable. Finding himself alone, cold, hungry and poor, he does not 'repent' of his selfishness – we are not told that he misses the love and affection of his father and his brother – but instead remembers that his father's servants will be better fed than he. Realizing this, he said 'how many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger.'

So he resolves to return and to become one of his father's hired hands. His instinct is self-preservation, not repentance of heart.

As he approaches his home, his father sees him from afar. Why has he returned? Maybe he has returned to ask for more money? Maybe (as is the case) he is returning in the hope of some form of financial salvation? If these doubts were in his father's mind they are not a part of this parable. His father, full of pity for his errant son, runs to meet him in an emotional reunion. He welcomes his son:

... for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found ...

The acceptance of the father is unconditional and risks the disappointment that the son returns for anything other than reunion or being 'found' again. The parable speaks to us of the total acceptance of the God of love, who loves us first, even though we might be unworthy of him.

Points for reflection and discussion

A Muslim reading this parable would be perplexed as to what this is saying about God. Surely the father is weak in his parental authority? Should not the father wait until the son prostrates himself in front of his father, begging for forgiveness? Surely the only right relationship between God and humanity is one of 'submission', where the human embraces God's path? Maybe the other son in this story is more worthy of our sympathy? Are Christians really saying that God is weak?

- What does this parable say to us about a Christian understanding of the love of God?
- What lies behind possible Muslim questions regarding this parable?
- How might Christians explain to Muslims their belief in the self-giving love of God made known in Jesus Christ?