

The greatest story ever told

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Preacher: Rev. Andrew Longwe

[0 : 00] Good evening and a warm welcome to the service this evening.

This evening the service is going to be taken by the Reverend Andrew Longwe. He would have been with us over the communion weekend which would have been this weekend. And although he's not able to be with us physically, he's sent through a couple of services for us to be able to gather around God's word with him in this different kind of a way.

And this evening we'll hear a short word from Andy and we'll also hear him share his testimony in the course of the service. So I'm thankful to him and thankful on your behalf, Tim, for leading us in worship over this large day.

We're going to begin this time of worship by singing to God's praise and we sing from Psalm 27.

And the praises tonight, the Psalms and the two hymns, have been chosen by Andy as well.

Psalm 27, we'll sing from verses 1 to verse 4. The Lord's my light and saving health who shall make me dismayed. My life's strength is the Lord of whom then shall I be afraid.

[1 : 27] When as my light and saving health who shall make me dismayed.

My life's strength is the Lord of whom then shall I be afraid.

When as mine enemies and foes, most wicked persons all, To eat my flesh against me rose, they stumbled and did fall.

Against me though an host encamp, my heart yet fearless is.

Though war against me rise, I will be confident in this.

[2 : 46] One thing I of the Lord desired and will seek to obtain, That all days of my life I may within God's house remain.

That I, the beauty of the Lord, behold me and admire, And that I in his holy place may reverently inquire.

Let's join together in a short word of prayer and then I'll hand over the rest of the service to Andy. Let's unite our hearts in prayer. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you once more for the encouragement that your word brings to us.

The fact that when we have the Lord as our light and our saving health, We have no one and nothing to be afraid of.

We thank you that the Lord Jesus has defeated sin and Satan and death and hell. We thank you that we're able to say with the Apostle Paul, Even in the face of death, O death, where is your sting?

[4 : 21] And although Lord we know the reality of a sense of loss when those who are in Christ pass on from time into eternity, We thank you that we are given a hope which is eternal.

We thank you that we have the promise that those who have the Lord Jesus as their Saviour Are given the assurance of eternal life.

And we pray that that would be an assurance that each one of us have as we listen in and as we watch into the service tonight. We pray that we would know that you, Lord Jesus, are our Saviour.

We thank you, Lord. And we pray that we would have the assurance that as we come to you, we are able to call you our Father. And we thank you for the promise that we're given that the moment we believe the Holy Spirit, God himself comes to live in our hearts.

So we thank you, Lord, for the wonder of these gospel truths, even as we think about a line or two in that psalm. And we pray that this evening, as your word is opened and as your servant Andy opens your word and also has life to us, We pray that we would hear your voice.

[5 : 38] We pray that we would be encouraged, that we would be directed, that Jesus would be lifted up and that we and that many would be drawn to him. Help us, Lord, we pray, to see ourselves in our great need as those who are sinners.

And help us to see Jesus as the all-sufficient Saviour. And enable each one of us, by faith, to come to the Lord Jesus. We ask that you would bless Andy in particular.

We thank you for him and for his wife, Marina, and for their wee boy, Theo. We pray that you would bless him as he has been a blessing to us over the course of these days.

Bless him in his home. Bless him in Cumbernauld as he ministers in the church and as he reaches out in that community. We pray, Lord, that he may be an instrument in your hands and that you would lead him and that you would guide him, that you would use him for your glory in the place that you have set him.

So hear our prayers. Cleanse us from our sin. Empty us of all that is of self. And fill us with the Holy Spirit that we may be in that spirit of worship on the Lord's day.

[6 : 51] And we ask all these things together with the forgiveness of our sins. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, good evening, North Harris Free Church. It's good to be able to join with you this evening as well and to share a word of testimony.

Before I do that, I'd like us to look for a few moments at a passage in Luke's Gospel again, this time Luke 15 and the story of the prodigal son, a story that many of us know so well.

So let me begin by reading that and then we'll pray and we'll consider it. And then I'll share a bit of my own story of what God did in my life. If you get your Bibles open at Luke 15, I want to read the first two verses and then we'll jump down to verse 11.

This is the word of God. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

Verse 11. Jesus continued, There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, Oh father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them.

[7 : 55] Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth and wild living. After he'd spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who'd sent him to the fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. I'll set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

[8 : 58] But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For the son of mine was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. The older brother became angry and refused to go in.

So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

But when the son of yours who squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him. My son, the father said, You're always with me and everything I have is yours.

[10 : 03] But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. Amen. And may God bless this reading from his holy word.

Well, before I share my testimony, I'd love to just look at this parable of the prodigal son and his older brother for just a few moments. And I'm calling this the greatest story ever told.

And it's told by the greatest storyteller to ever live, Jesus Christ himself. And if we're going to appreciate this parable, what we need to understand is who Jesus' original audience was. Verses 1 and 2 tell us that standing before him that day were a crowd made up of tax collectors and sinners. That's the people you would least expect to find in church. That's your non-church going folk.

And then also standing before Jesus on that occasion were your Pharisees and teachers of the law. That's your religious folk. The people you would expect to find in church. And so Jesus shares this parable, shares this great story to a crowd made up of very different people.

[11:07] And as we hear this story, I want us to think about as we go through it, how these people would have heard it. Now, just very quickly, in verse 11 we're told that in this story there is a father who had two sons.

And as we say, we should know the father and the story will represent God the father. And the son, the younger son, will represent the tax collectors and sinners. And the older son will represent the religious leaders who are listening to the story.

Now, in verse 12 we're told that the younger son said to his father, Father, give me my share of this state. In other words, there came a point in this young son's life where he wanted to get away from his father, away from the family home, away from the faith that he had been reared and raised in. This younger son was the one who wanted freedom. And he thought he would get freedom if he could just live life apart from his father, apart from his family, apart from the faith he'd been raised in.

And so on one occasion he goes up to his father and he demands his inheritance. Now you and I know how inheritances work. You get an inheritance when your parent dies.

[12:20] But the problem here is, is the father's alive. And so in essence what the younger son says to the father, I wish you were dead, I just want your stuff, not you. And in the first century this was scandalous talk.

But remember who's listening to this story. You've got the tax collectors and the sinners. That's the crooks and the criminals. Tax collectors were often people who'd been brought up as Jews, but then at one point in their life they decided to turn their back and become traitors, even to their Jewish people, and they chose to work for the Roman Empire.

And you've got sinners, prostitutes, who at one point in their life decided that they were no longer live pretending to live for God, but they just wanted to live for self.

And so no doubt as they heard the story of this younger son, they could identify with his experience. They knew that dream and that longing for freedom. They knew that reality of wanting to be away from the father, away from the family, away from the faith that they were raised with.

Now, there's just no telling a younger son what to do. There comes a point in so many people's life where people will do what they want to do.

[13:40] They want to make their own decisions. They want to go on that exploration of life for themselves. And that's what this younger son longed for. We're going to see he longed for that party lifestyle.

He wanted to spend time with women. He wanted to party and experience pleasure and popularity. And so, we read the father divided his state between them.

The first thing we learn about the father is that he was a gracious father. He didn't have to do this. But he was generous and gracious and so he gave this young son his share of the state.

Now, as the Pharisees are listening to this, they're probably looking over the tax collectors and thinking, this is your story. You are the rebels.

You are the people who've turned your back on God. Jesus is speaking about you. Well, the story continues and we read in verse 13.

[14:48] Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had and he set off for a distant country. And there he squandered his wealth in wild living. Now, Jesus doesn't need to go into all the detail because we know what happened.

The younger brother got together, his inheritance, all his money, went to a foreign land and he lived it up large. He would be the guy who would be in a nightclub and he would be paying for everyone's drinks.

Everyone thought of this guy. He's a legend. He's such a great guy. He's one of my friends. As he's dishing out his money, as he's buying people drinks, as he's having a good time.

And the woman would have loved him. In fact, we read later on that he squandered his wealth on prostitutes. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need.

The Jewish boy who's rebelled goes from living at large to hitting rock bottom. Because of the famine, because of the recession in the country, his life ends up in towers.

[16:01] Look at verse 15. He went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one would give him anything.

And everything that Jesus here says, it really shows the depth, the misery, the state that this son has got himself into.

Jews view pigs as unclean. They don't eat bacon. And here, this Jewish son has to work in a pigsty. And so bad is his life that no one will give him anything. The people who he once partied with, the people he once had a good time with, well, they're not going to even let him eat the pods that the pigs were eating.

And as we look at this young son's story, this is what we see. He wanted freedom, but in the faraway land, he discovered slavery to his lusts and his desires and to his appetites.

[17:14] And no doubt that which was experimental, perhaps experimenting with drugs, experimenting with girls, it became routine. The constant desire became an unstoppable demand. Trying out became must-have.

The dream of making memories was now the reality of living with regrets. The longing for being filled with pleasure was now the reality of living with pain.

Remember who's listening to this story? The tax collectors and the sinners. This is their story. They can identify with someone who's blown it, who wanted freedom but found slavery.

And also, there are the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, and they're probably, as they're hearing Jesus' story, they're looking at the tax collectors and sinners and thinking, this is your story, guys. Listen. Now, the picture here is so dire.

And because he's at rock bottom, look at verse 17, when he came to census. He said, how many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am, starving to death.

[18:27] That's how bad it is. He's starving to death. I'll set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

Make me like one of your hired men. So he got up and went to his father. You know what? He woke this young man up to his senses as being down in the gutter and realizing that even the servants in his father's house have got more than him.

You can picture him standing there in the pigsty, realizing what he's done, the mess that he's made of his life. I have sinned against you and against heaven. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. That's what he's going to say. Make me like one of your hired men, Father. Now, he gets it. He's sinned. That's the problem. He's done wrong before God.

And that's what all of us have done. We are, by nature and by deed, sinners. Now, as the tax collectors and the sinners are listening to this and the Pharisees and the teachers of law listen to this, they're probably expecting that the father will have one response.

[19:47] And it's going to be punishment. Like, this son has brought shame to the family's name. He's squandered his inheritance. He's gone and he's wasted his life.

And perhaps because of some of the things that he's done in this faraway country, in this Jewish culture, he's deserving of being stoned to death. And so both who are listening to this story are kind of waiting for what's going to happen next.

He is going to be punished. How's the father going to respond? Well, look at what we read. Verse 20. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son and threw his arms around him and kissed him. This is not what they were expecting. Here's the dramatic twist. The son, whilst he's a long way off, is walking home and his father sees him and his father runs to him.

And in that culture, a father would never run. And yet he runs to his son because of compassion. Compassion means love that's moved to action.

[21:02] The father sees his son and he loves him. And so he runs and he hugs him and he kisses him intensely. And the son wants to spew his speech to his father.

The son said, verse 21, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But as he's just managed to spew out this speech, the father starts barking orders to the servants.

The father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. And so they began to celebrate. Now imagine you're a tax collector and sinner listening to the story. This is not what you were expecting to hear. And it certainly was not what the Pharisees and teachers of law were expecting to hear.

The son is clothed by the father. He gets a robe. He gets shoes. He gets jewelry. They call the bands. They get the music ready. They're throwing a party.

[22 : 04] They kill the fattest beast. They're going to enjoy the best food. Now don't miss what's happened here.

How it ended up here. The son came to his senses. He came to the point where he grasped the depth of his sin and his rebellion. He'd sinned against God and he'd sinned against heaven.

He knew he didn't deserve to be taken back as a son. He said, I'm no longer to be your son. Maybe you'll take me back as a servant. And it was with that knowledge that he came home. And when he came home, though, he discovered the height of his father's love.

Unconditional, unearned, undeserved. He was taken back not as a servant but as a son. He was forgiven and he was received. And the word that captures this son's experience is the word grace. He got what he didn't deserve. Everyone listening to this, that's why it was such a twist. They're not expecting to hear a story that has right at its heart grace.

[23 : 07] Getting what you don't deserve. In that culture, people ought to get what they deserve. This son deserved punishment. But instead he gets a party.

I reckon the tax collectors and sinners who are listening to this at this point are crying. Blown away by the fact that Jesus says that if they return to the Father, they will be forgiven.

You know, just in short, when we run from God, that is sin. When God runs to us, that is grace. It's the good news of Christianity.

In Jesus Christ, God came to rescue us and save us. It's all of grace. It's what we do not deserve. Now, the younger son represents some of us here.

Those of us who, right now, may be running from God. Those of us who in our past life know that a big part of our story is that we ran away from God.

[24 : 22] Tonight you need to run home if you're running from God. Run to the Father. He will welcome you and accept you. Come and confess your sin to Him. Acknowledge your sin against Him.

And receive His forgiveness. He will heap you with grace upon grace. He will fill you with His love. He will wipe away your past. He will fill you with His Spirit.

He will clothe you with His righteousness. You see, the amazing thing about becoming a Christian is that everything we think that we could find apart from the Father is actually what we get with the Father.

So you think you'll find freedom apart from God, but you come to God and you find freedom. You think, and instead of finding freedom apart from God, you find slavery, like the Son. You think that apart from God you can party, but yet here the Son comes home to the Father and his Father throws the party.

Some people think of God as the ultimate buzz killer, the party pooper. In this parable, He's the party starter. He's the one in whose presence there is the fullness of joy and there's life and life in its abundance.

[25 : 26] So many of us have got such a wrong view of God and we need the Bible to correct it. Now, the Pharisees and the religious leaders, they're still listening to this and they're furious.

They're angry. They can't believe what's just happened. They can't believe the story. It doesn't make sense. It wasn't what they were expecting. And so can I briefly finish this story off?

Because Jesus has something to say to the older brother, the good boy, the one who represents the Pharisees. And no doubt represents some of us listening tonight. Verse 25. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

Like he's walking near the house and he hears there's a party in the house. He can't believe it. What's going on? So he called one of his servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. So here we have this moment of the servant telling the news to the older brother, but his brother is not happy.

[26 : 33] He's angry. And you know, what we get angry about, it reveals a lot about us. This older brother, he doesn't like what has happened. He doesn't get grace.

And you know, as Jesus often shared parables, it would get right under the skin of the Pharisees. It was like when Jesus spoke about the anger and the fury of the older brother.

He was tapping right into the anger and the fury of the Pharisees and religious leaders who were listening on. Now why does he get so angry? He gets so angry because this older brother doesn't think his brother deserves this.

But you know, in so many ways, the older brother, who thinks he's completely different from his younger brother, is actually in so many ways very similar. He thinks, I'm the obedient, I'm the productive member of this family, I'm the squeaky clean one.

But look at how he answers his father in verse 29. He answered his father, look, all these years I've been slaving for you, never disobeyed your orders.

[27 : 37] You never gave me a young goat that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours, notice he doesn't even call him his brother. When this son of yours who's squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

He can't even bring himself to say, my brother, he says, this son of yours. Look at what he says, I've been slaving for you. I've never disobeyed you.

You never gave me a party. And there's more than a hint of disrespect here. There's rage in his heart. Outwardly, if we'd met this older brother, he would have seemed so loving, so humble, so obedient.

But in so many ways, it's not what outward appearances reveal. It's actually the inward reality that matters. And that's what God looks upon. This older brother thought his goodness, his obeying the law should have given him a party.

He wanted the blessings of his father, but he didn't want a relationship. He didn't understand grace. He didn't understand it's not about what he was doing.

[28 : 44] It's about what God had done for him. He wanted a party that he could have with his friends.

He wanted a party lifestyle, but he just didn't want a relationship with his father. This older brother who calls out his younger brother who's squandered the money with prostitutes.

He's blind to his own sin. He's fully aware of his younger brother's sin. And he can't see the grace and the love of his father. All he wants to do is harp on about what his brother has done instead of joining the party and celebrating the forgiveness that his younger brother has experienced.

Remember who's listening? The Pharisees. That's them. They're hearing this story. They can't believe that Jesus would welcome tax collectors and sinners and they would be saved. But that's exactly what Jesus does.

He came to seek and save the lost. And you know, if you're listening to this tonight and it annoys you when you see somebody who's lived a life, a colourful lifestyle and they come of Christ.

[30 : 03] Maybe it's because there's a Pharisee within. You know, when you read about this story of this son who found himself in a pigsty, you can think that's the low point of the story.

But I think that would be wrong. I think the low point in this story is the older brother standing outside of the party, the feast. Because see in the New Testament, especially in Luke's Gospel, heaven is depicted as a banquet, as a feast.

And here's the older brother and he's standing outside of it. He's not willing to come into it. But notice what the father does. Verse 31. My son, the father said, you're always with me and everything I have is yours.

But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And if you go back up to verse 28.

So his father went out and pleaded with him. Do you see what we see here? We see the father's grace to the older brother. He goes out and he pleads with him to come in.

[31 : 11] He pleads with him to come in and celebrate. We read about that there in verses 31 and 32. But the Pharisee couldn't. The older brother that represented the Pharisee, he just could not come in.

And so he misses the party. You know, the horrifying punchline of this story is the one who thought he was right with God because of his good works wasn't right with God.

We can do nothing to earn the father's embrace. We can do nothing to earn the father's salvation but respond to his pleas.

He comes after us. We need to respond to him. And this older brother, he can do that. And you know, this story finishes on a cliffhanger. We don't know how the older brother responded.

Did he come into the party? But the point has been made. Will the Pharisees, will they come to understand what Christ Jesus came to offer?

[32 : 22] Grace. Will the Pharisees, will they come to you? Will the Pharisees, will they come to you? Grace. Salvation for sinners. You know, I said in the story there's one father and two sons.

I wasn't telling you the whole story. There's three sons. There's the son of God who's telling this great story.

The son of God who we read about in Luke's gospel who went and was nailed to a cross of wood, who shed his blood so that our sins could be forgiven.

And so as we finish hearing this great story, our response is to listen to the great storyteller and respond to him and confess that we've sinned against him and to ask him if we can share in all that he died to secure for us.

And the amazing thing is he welcomes us in. He welcomes us into the party. He clothes us for it with a robe of righteousness. And he invites us to come and feast with him for now and for all eternity.

[33 : 39] Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for this powerful story. We thank you for how it speaks right to the very heart of the gospel.

That we are those who run from you. Some of us in flagrant rebellion. Others of us in a more quiet and yet just as much deceived way.

God, we praise you that you have come to us in the person of your son. And you've done everything necessary so that we can be restored and brought into the family of faith.

Adopted as sons and daughters. How we praise you and we thank you. In your son's precious name we pray this. Amen. Amazing grace.

How sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me I once was lost but now I'm found Was blind but now I see 'T'was grace that taught my heart to fear And grace my fears relieved How precious did that grace appear The hour I first believed My chains are gone I've been set free

[35 : 45] My God, my Savior Has ransomed me And like a flood And like a flood His mercy rains And like a flood His mercy rains Unending love Amazing grace Amazing grace The Lord has promised good to me His word My hope secures Even my shield and portion be As long as I As long as I