

TIME WITH THE CHILDREN:

I have some things in this bag, and this is one. Can you tell me what it is? Yes, it is a paper-clip. If you have a number of papers that you want to hold together a paper-clip is a good way to do it.

A few months ago we were watching TV, and they did something very unusual.

They took a paper-clip and pulled it all out of shape, like this...(demo). Then they put it in a bowl, and poured hot water over it. And do you know what happened? The paper clip went all back to its first shape again.

So I thought I would like to try that and see what happens. So I got some paper clips, and pulled them all out of shape, put them in a bowl, poured on the hot water, and what happened? When I did it the other day, nothing happened. It didn't work. It certainly worked when they did it on the Telly.

We can learn something from this, for we are a bit like paper-clips.

Where there is sinfulness, when we say and do things that Jesus doesn't like, we are all distorted like the paper-clips.

When there is forgiveness, we are restored, like the paper-clip on the TV, and can start again afresh. That is what Jesus does for us, and we can do it too.

SERMON & PLAY READING.

Let us pray: May the words from my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer, and together we say Amen.

There is an old story of an Englishman an Irishman and a Scotsman who attended the funeral of a mutual friend, who was a Buddhist. It was customary when a Buddhist died for those remaining to put some money in the coffin to help provide the necessities of life in the next world for their friend. So the Englishman put a \$20 note in the coffin, whereupon the Irishman took out the \$20 and replaced it with a \$50 note. Seeing that, the Scotsman took out the \$50 and wrote out a cheque for \$100 and put that in the casket. A week or so later he discovered that the cheque had been cashed, by the Funeral Director, who was a Jew!

Jesus was a master-teller of extraordinary stories. Jesus himself was a Jew and he knew that Jews were hard-headed and hard-hearted when it came to money. So did the Jews themselves, and the more Jesus laid it on the more they would laugh at themselves. To see the funny side of it we have to look at the stories in terms of their situations.

Take the stories that were read to us this morning from Luke Chapter 15. First there is the one about the lost sheep. "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep..." said Jesus. That would get a laugh. In those days, owners of sheep only had 10 or a dozen, so anybody with a hundred would be like a New Zealand farmer having a million sheep. If one got lost would he go and look for it? Of course not - it wasn't worth bothering about. Forget it. But not this Shepherd. He would leave the flock in a safe place and go and look for the lost one until he found it, because every one, every person is precious.

Or take the story about a woman having ten silver coins, and loses one. Now there's a laugh. No woman would have any money to keep at all, the hard-headed husband would see to that. Even if she did have some, and lost one of the coins, all hell would be let loose. Details like that were so extraordinary, so impossible that they would be hilarious.

Then there is the story about the spoilt young fellow who wanted his share of the inheritance now. Jesus is touching on a raw nerve here, for there was a move afoot in his time for any inheritance to not just go to the eldest son which was traditional, but to be shared among all the sons, maybe not in equal shares but in some proportion anyway, and then only when the old man died. All this was very controversial. So when the teenager said to Pop that he wanted his share there and then, and was

given it, the hearers would burst out laughing. No Jew would possibly agree to that. It was way-way-out!

But Jesus piles it on more and more. The lad blows the lot and comes home cap in hand looking for a job, because he knew where he would be better off. The old man indulges him and re-instates him as his son and turns on a lavish party for him. This too was so over-the-top that they would laugh and laugh. Can you imagine a Jew in those days ever doing anything like that? Even today it would be pretty unlikely, wouldn't it?

For the father to hitch up his robe and to run down the road was a definite no-no, and to kit the boy out with new sandals, give him a ring to re-instate his sonship, and have the prize calf due to get top honours at the coming equivalent of an A & P Show, slaughtered for a party, was all too much. They would laugh until they were sore, it was so impossible. So what was Jesus getting at? It would boil down to the father saying in effect "No matter what he has done, he is still my son, and I love him."

I saw something like it happen once, without all the extravaganza. A new senior couple had moved into the Parish, and I was standing with the man outside about to depart, when a car pulled up, and a young woman came in the gate and stood there, looking our way. They had been telling me about their family, most of whom made good, but one daughter had kicked over the traces, had got into bad company, and was clearly the black sheep of the family, and here she was.

The look on the father's face was one of "who does she think she is coming here like this. The cheek of it." Then the look changed completely, and he went over to her and took her in his arms and gave her a hug while tears rolled down his face. "This is my daughter," he said to me as they headed for the door, and then said to her, "Let's go inside."

Let us go inside with them and guess what may have transpired.

DAD: (Calling) Mother, May has come home.

MUM: Really? That's a big surprise. Hello May. (Hugs and kisses). Welcome to our new home. Would you like a coffee? There's some fresh in the pot.

MAY: Yes please. (All get a cup.)

DAD: So where do we go from here?

MUM: Let's sit and talk about it. (3 sit at 3-quarter table)

DAD: It is good to see you again. We wondered if it would ever happen. I must say that some of the things we heard about you were not very nice.

MAY: What sort of things?

DAD: We heard that you had a small business in Australia, in which you sold carvings you made from Australian hardwood. The parents of a young lady we know bought one for \$1000 dollars including the courier fee, but it never arrived.

MAY: Yes. I couldn't make enough carvings, the wood was so hard, and finally I went bankrupt. I am sorry several people lost out because of it. I would like to make it up to them if I ever can.

MUM: That would be good.

DAD: I have a problem with other news that you were dealing in drugs. At one time I spent a year working with recovering alcoholics and drug addicts, helping them get back on the right track again, and it disturbs me that you were helping people to do the opposite and go down the drain as it were.

MAY: I admit that I did that for a while, especially when I desperately needed funds and it looked an easy way to make big money. But I soon realised it was at a price. As a dealer I had to constantly watch my back. I had to shift into a different flat every 6 weeks or so, for people would turn up

wanting drugs, and the neighbours soon put two and two together and called the police. It was difficult too to sell drugs at night in the dark street, avoiding police patrols, and often the amount of money handed over was short-changed. Chasing them up was unproductive when they couldn't sell enough stolen goods to feed their \$1,000-a-week habit. Also, it was hard to keep up the supplies when shipments fluctuated. So all in all it was a bad show, and I gave it up as soon as I could.

DAD: I find it hard to forgive you for helping people ruin their lives, when I had been trying to do the opposite.

MUM: (To Dad) I hope you are not going to be unforgiving like you were over that Tom Smith situation, where you were so bitter it affected us as well. When we met Tom some months later he was as free as the breeze for he had said he was sorry, and that he had forgiven himself, and was going forward, whilst you were the one who stayed with a very negative attitude for a long time.

DAD: You are so right, so I forgive you, May, and won't hold it against you. Anyway, I realise that there are things that you might have to forgive me for during your upbringing, for I wasn't the perfect father by any means. I did the best I could at the time, but I know I made mistakes along the line.

MAY: I forgive you Dad, and thank you for forgiving me. (Touch hands meaningfully). What about you Mum?

MUM: Of course I forgive you. I'm your mother! So where do we go from here? What do you want from us?

MAY: Well I'd like to come home till I get on my feet again if you will have me. I've no money and only the clothes I stand up in. Would you help me?

DAD: We haven't any money to spare as we have a mortgage on this house to cope with.

MUM: But we have been saving up for our funerals, and maybe we could lend you some of that.

DAD: Only with very tight conditions of repayments. The loan could be \$3,000 max. We would need you to pay board, presuming you will look for a job.

MAY: Yes, I should be able to get something in the construction industry, in which I do have some experience as it happens. I'd be grateful for the loan.

MUM: We could go to the op shops and second hand clothing places to get you kitted out cheaply. You could pay for it out of your loan money when you get it.

MAY: Good idea. Also, I'd like to be here on a flatting basis, and do my share of cooking and chores, if we can come to some arrangement.

DAD: I am sure we can. And any problems we can sit down and talk about them.

MAY: Thank you. It's such a relief to be given a new chance. I do want to turn my life around.

MUM: Good.

DAD: You will have to really prove yourself this time.

MAY: I know, and I'll do my best to put it all behind me and start afresh. Your support and encouragement will surely help.

MUM. Good. Good. Come now and I'll show you the room you can have.

(HYMN 519: Dear Lord and Father of Mankind (Omit v 2))

(READING: Luke 15: 3–32 (Pages 100–101 NT))

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