

**31 March 2019**

**Psalm 32**

**Luke 15.1-2, 11-32**

**In step with God**

I grew up as a member of the Boys' Brigade.

I think I heard the Boys' Brigade once described as the military wing of the Boy Scouts. When I was part of the Boys' Brigade we certainly did rather more drill and marching than the Scouts did.

And I can remember that awful feeling that you had when you realised that somehow you had got out of step with everyone else. And trying to get back into step is not easy.

There is a short clip on the internet when one of the military personnel marching in the parade for the Royal Wedding last year found themselves out of step ...

*Video clip*

Unfortunately he was right in the front row and right on camera ... and seems to have lost the knack of getting back into step!

The question of being in step or out of step is not always straightforward.

When I was in the Boys Brigade I was part of the band. I played the bugle.

When you are marching in a band, when you are given the order to 'Quick March' you always step off on the left foot on the first beat of a bar. So your left foot should always come down on the first beat of the bar.

There was one occasion when I was told off by one of the officers because I was out of step.

I tried to point out that I was the only one in the band who was 'in step'. Everybody else was out of step!

I might have been out of step with everyone else, but I was in step with the music.

I think that we can look at today's gospel reading through the lens of asking the question, 'Who is in step with God?'

Jesus tells the parable of the two sons against the background of his critics raising this very question.

We have one of the gatherings that were frequent in Jesus' ministry.

We have Jesus in the centre of it, drawing a wide amount of interest.

We have a group of outsiders and oddballs – people with questionable reputations – who gathered around Jesus because he was saying something very different from the teachers and preachers they were used to. (The tax collectors and 'sinners'.)

And then we have the Pharisees and teachers of the law ... who were there to keep their eye on Jesus.

And if you were an objective observer at the time and asked the question, 'Which of these is in step with God?'

... you would probably have assumed that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were upright, respectable, knowledgeable, pious. They were certainly in step with God.

You would certainly have had a lot of question marks about this group of tax collectors and sinners. Their reputations followed them. How could they possibly be in step with God.

So this left the tricky question of where Jesus fits into this.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law saw things in pretty clear terms:

- they were pretty confident that they were fully in step with God
- they knew for sure that these oddballs were not in step with God
- and because Jesus enjoyed company with this group of failures and outsiders ... doesn't that put Jesus in step with them and out of step with God?

The tax collectors and sinners were also pretty sure

- they probably also assumed that the Pharisees must be in step with God
- they knew that they had messed up – everyone kept making that clear to them. They probably had few illusions that they were out of step with God

- .... except that Jesus had thrown this all up in the air. He seemed to be willing and able to invite them to walk back in step with God ... despite all of this

And so Jesus tells the story of the two sons.

And this story asks the question, 'Which of these sons is in step with the father.'

The younger son clearly starts off out of step with his father.

He couldn't have shamed his father more.

- He wants out of the family home
- out of the family business
- out of the country

He can't wait for his father to die ...

And when he gets what he wants he blows it all on wild living ... and ends up destitute.

And everyone listening to the story would have thought, 'He's got what's coming to him.'

He couldn't have been more out of step with his father and his family.

And then at his lowest ebb, something registers about home.

And he decides to return ... not as a son but as a servant ...

And still he is out of step with his Father ... because he has not been able to imagine that his father would receive him home with open arms.

And the father's forgiveness brings him back into step.

The story of the older son is just as turbulent.

He is in the background of the story in the beginning ... and the assumption must be that he is the loyal son who is fully in step with the father.

- he also has benefited from the younger son's greed, because he has already received his share of the inheritance
- he stays in the family home
- he stays in the family business

- he toes the family line

Until, of course, the younger son returns.

And any of us would be able to understand his grievance.

- he's never brought shame on the family and here is his father lavishing a massive welcome-home feast on his brother, who's been off wasting the family wealth, living the high life
- and to top it all, his father seems to have forgotten to tell him!
- and when has his father given him a banquet?

Suddenly, the steady, loyal son is out of step with his father – seriously out of step.

He thought he had always been the one who was in step with the father. So where had things gone wrong?

Many of us would have great sympathy with him, I think.

Jesus is daring to suggest that the story of these two sons is not unlike the story of the two groups of people who are gathered around him.

The story of the younger son is the story of the misfits, failures and outcasts who he dares to draw into his company, because he offers to them the welcome of God. When everyone else has labelled them as 'rejects' and 'lost causes', Jesus sees them as 'family'.

He accepts that they have been seriously out of step with God. If their story is the story of the younger son, then Jesus is clearly accepting that they have made some bad choices. But he rejects the idea that there is no way back for them ... and he is prepared to show the open arms of God running out to meet them through his own lifestyle and actions.

And Jesus is daring to suggest that the anger of the Pharisees and teachers at Jesus' actions is not unlike the anger of the older son in the story. It may be understandable ... but is it possible that they are angry because actually they are out of step with God?

They are living with the idea that they know who God is, what God requires of them, what it means to be a loyal child ... but when it comes to this critical moment and the younger son returns, they end up falling out with the Father because they cannot accept his actions.

They have openly accused Jesus of being out of step with God. And now Jesus turns the table on them.

But, of course, the challenge of this story is whether the father in the story is in step or out of step with God.

The father in this story is certainly out of step with parenting expectations of his time ... and indeed of many times.

Giving in to his son's petulant demands would have been seen as weakness and recklessness ...

And welcoming him back with no questions asked ... well that would have simply added to this assessment.

If all parents behaved like that ... well that is the recipe for chaos and social disorder, isn't it?

So can it be possible that this father can be in step with God? That we can see something of the heartbeat of God in the heartbeat of the father in this story?

If God is indeed like this, is it at all helpful to use language like 'keeping in step with God' to talk about our relationship with him?

This kind of God does not walk and certainly does not march with military precision ... in a way that's the way that the older son thought he needed to keep in step with his father.

Here is one whose rhythm is constantly changing with changed circumstances ... who is responsive to what is going on around him ...

This is more like having to learn to dance ... but in a kind of free dance – keeping in step with the free movements of God’s love in the world.

God asks us to have a freedom in the love that we share and know and show in order to keep in step with his love. His is a rhythm that is constantly changing in order to respond to changed circumstances ... and all in the name of a love that is always at work to welcome back into family.

He is always calling us to live and breathe in the rhythm of his love in the world, inviting us to keep in step with him.