On Sunday I spoke about the time when Norma and I lived in Girvan and lost our three-legged cat, Sammy. A quick count up reveals that over the years we have had 14 cats so far and on the wall upstairs hangs the picture reproduced below. I call it cat heaven and believe you can see in it almost every cat we’ve had, not as a photographic representation but in the character they exhibited.

Each was different and the picture reminds me of that variety.

I remember Poppy was small and loved cheese while Sammy loved raw liver. Boxy loved to sleep, keto loved to leap from the dressing table onto Norma’s back and Juno was a hunter. Pudsey was the only cat we had who would bring a ball back to you if you threw it- honestly. Rosie was tiny and we called her bin cat because of where she was rescued from. Penny was fluffy and needed constant combing, James was -well just big. We lost Miah for a day because she had curled up inside the tumble dryer. We actually thought Maih’s markings so special that they must be unique. Well that’s what we thought until one day in Midmar, where we discovered every second cat looked just like Miah. One Midmar resident it seems was willing to make the trip across that hill. Sadly, Miah’s sister, Molly, did not get on well with the cars along the road outside Echt manse.

 George was almost feral and today Polly happily walks up and down the tops of doors in the manse while brother Stewie pretends he can really jump, but usually spends the half hour he is awake each day chasing Polly round the house.

All cats with different characters and yet all cats that have been part of our family over the years and left us with many stories to chew over.

But then again, when it comes to stories, it is characters and how they interact that makes them interesting, memorable and sometimes challenging, isn’t it?

Last Sunday we looked at the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin that Luke starts chapter 15 of his gospel with. He ends the chapter with another story, the one we know as the prodigal son. That’s the story we will be reflecting on this Sunday in our joint service with Drumoak-Durris church. Both websites will carry the same videos.

But step back from the story and consider what Luke is doing here. He provides these three stories as a kind of 1st century ZOOM lesson for life.

Jesus takes centre stage, he has invited not just the muttering Pharisees and scribes to his online classroom, but tax collectors and sinners and we are invited along by Luke too.

The first two stories he tells are comfortable warm up stories for the session. Stories of people showing the right characteristics of patience, persistence and ending in parties. Stories of how people should treat property. The lost sheep is found, the lost coin is recovered. It’s hard work, but they are successful. We can sit back and enjoy these stories.

But then Jesus tells another story. We know it as the prodigal son and it turns out to be a bit of an examination piece.

Right, Luke says, listen to Jesus here. Jesus has given us two worked examples, so tell me now how this third story ends? The father and his two sons. Don’t forget there are two sons.

The Father gives the younger son his inheritance early and that son promptly gathers all his property and disappears elsewhere to live the good life. It’s a bit like the lost sheep and the lost coin, but not quite. The Father has not lost anything in one sense because he has allowed the son to leave him. He doesn’t go looking for him. Eventually it is the son who realises he has lost something and decides to return and look for what he thinks he has lost.

And that’s

The right to be called the Father’s son. He is worried.

But unlike the shepherd looking for the sheep or the woman looking for the coin, he doesn’t need to look hard.

He meets his father running quickly towards him ready to celebrate.

If the story stopped there it would be just a more complicated version of the lost sheep or coin to unpick.

But it doesn’t.

The older son who has been working all this time appears and objects to his father welcoming the younger son back and celebrating.

This forces us to think a bit more deeply and remember the two groups Luke mentions at the start of the chapter;

those murmuring Pharisees with the scribes

 and the tax collectors and sinners who Jesus sought.

It turns out that Luke is reminding us that we have to make a choice. What’s it going to be?

Which character are you?

Or are we all a mixture of both sons?

Sometimes like the younger son, sometimes like the older one?

But in the middle stands the Father

 Or why not the Mother?

Who loves his sons unconditionally and comes running to us

Long before we think of coming to him or her

That’s our God for you.

How would you go about celebrating that?

Our God is a great big God

And he holds us in his hands.

Peace be with you.

Amen