

LUKE 15.1-3, 11-32: COME HOME!

[Chelmsford 26 October 2008]

"Home", said the American poet Frost, "*is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in*".

This morning I want to preach about home - but not about home where your mother & father live, nor about home where perhaps your partner and the kids live, but about home as the place where God is to be found; home as the place where the family of God are to be found.

My text is based on a story Jesus once told of a boy who came home to his father - a story that is sometimes called the parable of the 'prodigal son', but which could perhaps be more aptly described as the parable of the 'waiting father'.

I want to look at story by focusing on the three main characters, and as we do shall we shall discover each of these three characters has a vital spiritual truth to teach us.

1. THE PRODIGAL SON -THE GOOD LIFE IS NOT WHAT IT IS CRACKED UP TO BE!

For many, if not most of us, home is a comforting thought. It's a place where we can relax and be ourselves.

But not everybody sings of "*Home sweet home*". For some home is a constricting & irksome environment in which to live - for that is where the parents are to be found. Mark Twain summed up the experience of many a teenager when he wrote: "*When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in 7 years*". For some young people the only advantage of home is that the cost of board and lodging is cheap compared with having a pad of one's own

The Prodigal was one of those bright young things who wanted his freedom. He was fed up with home and with the home's values. "*He wanted to be able to come down to breakfast in the mornings without having to answer the nagging question. 'Where were you last night?'. He wanted to be free*" (L.Griffiths).

Finally he could stand it no longer: v12 "**Father, give me my share of the property now**". According to the story the son in question was the younger son: i.e. according to the law of that day, ultimately one-third of the family estate due to him as opposed to the elder brother's two-thirds.

The younger son was no longer content to have a living allowance - he wanted his share of the estate then & there - "*Father, I want right now what's coming to me*" (The Message).

At first sight this seems a particularly callous and insensitive request.

It seems as if he couldn't wait for the old man to die.

However, viewed positively, one might say that he was characterised by a "*spirit of adventure*": for having sold his property "**he went to a country far away**" (v13).

Like 1000s of Jews before him, he set off to make his fortune.

Indeed, at the time of Jesus more Jews lived outside Palestine than inside Palestine - 4m Jews in Diaspora, but only 1m in Palestine.

Alas he ran into trouble – partly this was of his own making, and partly it was compounded by bad luck:

- He ran out of money: "**he wasted his money in reckless living**" (v13) - as the elder brother suspected, this probably involved girls. It is never cheap sowing one's wild oats.
- He ran into famine: "**He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country**" (v14). In the normal run of things he might perhaps have been helped by his friends, but they too were hard-pressed.

There was only one thing for him to do: he to find a job!

Needless to say, when money is short, beggars can't be choosers. In the case of this young man, "**He went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs**" (v15).

What is the most revolting job imaginable?

- In my book the most revolting job I have ever come across is scraping flesh off bones. I once visited a graveyard on the slope of a mountain in Austria – there land was so scarce that nobody was ever allowed to stay more than 10 years in their grave – when the 10 years were up what was left of the body was dug up and the bones stored in caverns...
- For Jews the most revolting job imaginable would have been a job with pigs – they regarded pigs as loathsome creatures. The Jewish rabbis used to say: "*cursed be the man who would breed swine*". Why? Because according to Lev 11.7 a pig was a so-called 'unclean' animal. Therefore in normal conditions no Jew would've anything to do with such a job. It would have stuck in his gullet - just like for me eating the skin of pink blancmange sticks in my gullet.

To make matters worse, the job was poorly paid: v16 "**He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods they ate**" - these long "**pod**s" from the carob tree were normally eaten only by animals - "**but no one gave him anything to eat**". The implication is that he stole some of the pods? How low could a person sink!

All very interesting you may say, but what has this got to do with me?

The relevance lies in that this is not just a story of a boy running away from home - but rather is an illustration of how so many of us spend our lives running away from God.

We think we know better than God and so we opt to go our own way.

To live life according to the Ten Commandments seems boring & constricting, and so we kick the traces - and in doing so we forget that God's commands made not for his convenience, but for ours.

But the truth is that life away from God is not what cracked up to be:

- The bright lights whether of Chelmsford/the West End don't lead to the good life. Pleasure - in the sense of true happiness & delight - is an elusive quality. The good life is not to be found in wine, women and song. Good as these things may be, there is an emptiness about all three where they are pursued as the ultimate source of happiness. In the case of the Prodigal the parable implies that he was more dead than alive while away from home: "**this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive**" declares the Father with great joy (v24)

- But if the bright lights don't lead to the good life, neither do the more respectable institutions of work, family, education. All these things are good in themselves, but they can never have ultimate value. Live for work, live for the family, live for education, and you will be as lost as the Prodigal.

Finally the Prodigal "**came to his senses**" (v17).

Sobered by his experience of caring for these revolting pigs, the Prodigal finally viewed things in harsh light of day.

A crisis brought him to point of seeing things as they really are.

This is true of many of us - when things go well, we kid ourselves we are self-sufficient, but trouble reveals superficiality of our thinking: the onset of death or illness or redundancy often lends a new perspective to life.

The rebellious young man became a repentant young man:

v18f: "**I will get up and go to my father, and say, 'Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers'**".

Here we have a reminder that when we sin, we sin in the first place against God.

All too often we limit sin to things that hurt other people, In fact when we sin, we are actually breaking God's commands, we are going against his way for living.

v20: "**So he got up and started back to his father**".

2. THE WAITING FATHER: GOD WAITS TO WELCOME US HOME

From the prodigal son the focus turns on the father.

How would you have reacted had you been the father? This week I came across an alternative version to the parable: *"When the prodigal son was still quite a way off, his father heard that he was coming and ran out to meet him. 'Go away', he said when he reached him, 'I've given you all you deserve. I have my own reputation to think about. I can't have you living here again, not with your reputation. What would the neighbours say?' And so the young man left, and his father and elder brother lived in respectability with the approval of their neighbours - for no breath of scandal was ever attached to them. And the young man went back to living in a pig sty"*.

OK, this version is a bit far-fetched - and yet it underlines the extraordinary behaviour of the father as depicted by Jesus.

For it was not the behaviour of the prodigal which was extra-ordinary.

Rather, it was the behaviour of the father. The father is the true hero

What a welcome the father gave his son!

- "**He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity**" [NRSV: "compassion"]. Is it over-imagination to picture the father day in/out scanning horizon? He never gave up hope – he was sure that one day his wandering son would return
- "**he ran**" to meet him: i.e. he took the initiative – there was no waiting for an apology. For an aged oriental this kind of behaviour might have been undignified, but the father in question couldn't care less about dignity: he was consumed with

love for his boy.

- **"he threw his arms round his son and kissed him"**: lit. *"he kissed him many times/tenderly"*: i.e. this was no polite greeting – the father didn't put out his cheek to his son - he gave him a good thumping kiss.

BUT that wasn't all. Far from treating his son like a hired hand, he went on to honour him. Look at what he ordered his servants to do (v22): he called for

- **"the best robe"**. This was a sign of honour. Our equivalent might be the granting of an OBE! For in those days when a king wanted to reward a deserving official, he would present him with a costly robe.
- **"a ring"**: i.e. a signet ring. Such a ring was a sign of authority. With such a ring one could seal official documents.
- **"shoes"**: mark of freedom. Shoes were a luxury - slaves went barefoot, but shoes worn by free men and women
- he killed the **"prize [fatted] calf"**: i.e. he threw a party!

What a welcome!

It's a great story – but it is more than a mere story.

Jesus is saying: God is waiting to welcome us home - as his sons & daughters.

It doesn't matter what we have done or how far we have wandered away from him, God is waiting to welcome us home.

Amazingly....

- God still loves us, even when we turn our backs on him.
- He still wants the very best for us, even when it could be argued that we are only getting our just deserts.
- His heart is grieved as we wander away from him, hurting ourselves in process.

BUT no parable does full justice to truth of God's love.

We talk of the father in this parable as the 'waiting father', but the fact is that God doesn't just wait for us to come to our senses - he has already taken the initiative - he sent his Son to die for us...

YET God is the waiting father. For love cannot compel love.

He waits for us to come to our senses and see that life is so much better at home.

He waits for us to return - for only as we repent of our foolishness/trust his loving goodness, can we enter into the fullness of his love & receive all the good things he wants to give us.

3. THE ELDER BROTHER: THERE IS NO PLACE FOR RELIGIOUS ONE-UPMANSHIP!

But we cannot finish yet. There is one more character to consider.

The story of the prodigal son doesn't end with the father's welcome home - but rather with the elder brother's resentment: v28 **"The elder brother was so angry that he would not go into the house"**

This final section of story is the bit we don't normally read in church.

To us it just doesn't seem central. And yet originally it was the chief point of story.

Let me remind you of the context in which this parable is found: 15.1f "**One day when many tax collectors and other outcasts were came to listen to Jesus, the Pharisees & the teachers of the law started grumbling, 'This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them'**".

With this criticism in mind, Jesus answers with a parable - he justifies his action with words: "*This is how God acts*".

In this story, then, the elder brother represents the religious people of the day...

At this point we, today's religious people, hopefully we begin to feel uncomfortable. For the elder brother provides us a reminder that there is no place for religious one-upmanship.

It is not only the prodigal who needs to repent, but also the elder brother!

If the younger brother was lost in a far country, the older brother was lost in his own self-righteousness.

Yes, let's be honest. Time and again we religious people have fouled it up.

We are not told exactly why the younger brother left home: was it simply the parents he couldn't stand? - or did his sanctimonious brother get on his wick?

The sad truth is that many people have left the church because of the church.

They have left because they couldn't stand the intolerance, the self-righteousness, the self-satisfaction of many Christian people.

The spirit of the Pharisees of old is alas still alive and well.

I believe that as Christian people we need to repent of our smugness, of our sense of religious one-upmanship.

The fact is that in one way or another we have all sinned - we have all failed God and one another.

True, we like the elder son we may not have left the father's house, but that doesn't mean to say that our attitudes toward God and others have been intrinsically better than those who have. Nor does the fact that our sins have perhaps been less colourful and apparently less outrageous, mean that they are any less serious in God's sight.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to whitewash the prodigals of this world.

The younger brother couldn't put all the blame on the elder brother for his leaving home: the younger brother had to take responsibility for his actions.

And yet there were perhaps mitigating factors. Maybe the elder brother had made life in the father's house very difficult for the younger brother.

I sometimes wonder how God is going to sort things out on the Day of Judgement - how he is going to judge those who spurned his love because they failed to discern his love in his people?

To sum up, there is a message for us all.

- For those of us who perhaps find ourselves in the category of the elder brother, there is a warning: to get our act together and repent for our failure to be the warm/welcoming/understanding/loving kind of people God would have us be.
- For those of us who perhaps find ourselves in the category of the younger brother, there is an invitation to come back to God and to experience his love. God is waiting for you, he is waiting for us all, to come to our senses, to repent of our sin and to come home.