

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

[Chelmsford, Word Alive, 2 October 2011]

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

This evening I want to us to think about home - but not about home where mother and 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.

It was to have been my theme last Sunday – called by Baptists ‘the Big Welcome Sunday’, but called by Anglicans ‘Back to Church Sunday’. Alas, we ran out of time last Sunday evening – and so I have decided to make it my theme for this evening.

My text is based on a story Jesus once told of a boy who came home to his father - a story that is normally called the parable of the "prodigal son".

- Incidentally, what does the word ‘prodigal’ mean? In a positive sense ‘prodigal’ means ‘lavish’; in a negative sense ‘wastefully extravagant’. The prodigal son was a ‘spendthrift’, a son who had no idea how to handle money.

But should the parable in which Jesus told of a spendthrift boy actually be called ‘the parable of the prodigal son’?

- I note with interest that the GNB entitles the story: ‘*The Lost Son*’; so too Peterson’s *The Message* and the NIV
- But just to focus on the prodigal son is to ignore the second half of the parable. It is the story of the sons. So the NRSV has the heading: ‘*The parable of the prodigal and his brother*’.
- Or is there another focus? Helmut Thielicke, a German preacher of a former generation, entitled the story as ‘the parable of the waiting father’. “*The ultimate theme of this story... is not the prodigal son, but the Father who finds us. The ultimate theme is not the faithlessness of men, but the faithfulness of God... The ultimate secret of this story is this: There is a homecoming for us all because there is a home*” (The Waiting Father 29)

Klyne Snodgrass, an American NT professor who wrote a book of 846 pages on the parables, argues that the best label for the parable is ‘*The compassionate father and his two lost sons*’. It may be a bit of a mouthful, but on reflection I believe that he is right.

So let us turn to Luke 15.11-32 and focus on each of the 3 main characters – in so doing we shall discover that each character reveals a vital spiritual truth

### **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 it is a place where 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. On the basis of Deut 21.15-17 we can deduce that one-third of family estate was due to him as opposed to elder brother's two-thirds – along with the extra money, the elder brother would have had the primary responsibility for caring for the parents. The younger son was no longer content to have a living allowance - he wanted his share of the estate then & there.

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

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

In the words of one commentator: in those days '*sons simply did not ask for an inheritance ahead of time. To do so would have been a terrible slap at a parent and a social scandal*' (Buttrick).

The prodigal son was not merely a 'wayward child' who went astray, he was 'a fairly offensive person', causing offence not just to his father, but no doubt also to his brother.

The youngest son was from the very beginning a rogue.

However, if we want to be more generous in spirit and view his behaviour more positively, we 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.

As you may know, at the time of Jesus there were more Jews living outside Palestine than inside Palestine – there were 4m Jews in Diaspora, but only 1m in Palestine.

Alas he ran into trouble – in part this trouble was of his own making, but it was also compounded by bad luck:

- In the first instance he ran out of money – that was his own fault: "**he wasted his money in reckless living**" (v13) - as the elder brother suspected, this probably involved **prostitutes** (v30). One preacher put it this way: '*He quaffs wine like water, sings every ribald song, and as for women, well, they may be expensive, but every growing boy should have a hobby*' (Buttrick). As many other young men have discovered, it is never cheap sowing one's wild oats.
- But in addition he ran into famine – that was just bad luck: "**He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country**" (v14). In the normal run of things he might have been helped by his friends, but they too hard-pressed.

So, there he was, broke, hungry and homeless. The prodigal from being 'a man about town' had become a 'bum'.

There was only one thing for him to do: 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 it is scraping flesh off bones. Yes, there is such a job. Years ago I once visited an Austrian graveyard on a steep mountainside – because of pressure on space, people could only be left in the grave for 10 years. At the end of the 10 years their bodies were dug up, and their bones were stored in one cavern, and their skulls in another.
- For Jews the most revolting job was to work with pigs – they were deemed to be 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 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 the pigs ate"** - these long "pods" 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! Stealing pig swill and then eating it – yuk!

All very interesting you may say, but what has this got to do with me?  
The relevance lies in the fact 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 10 commandments seems such a bore, it seems so 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 and 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) – literally 'he came to himself' (NRSV) – whether or not that is a Semitic expression for 'repentance' is debated by scholars, but one thing for sure, he began to see things as they really were. Sobered by his experience of caring for 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, kid ourselves we are self-sufficient, but trouble reveals superficiality of our thinking: onset of death or illness or redundancy often lends a new perspective to life.

- Question: Must 'famine' be present before conversion occurs? Is it possible to return to our senses before we hit the bottom?

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 - but 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?

In preparing for this sermon 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 & 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 & 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

There is a lot to be said for the suggestion that instead of naming the parable after the prodigal son, the parable should be named after *'The Waiting Father'* - for it was his welcome (not son's return) which forms highlight of story.

What a welcome! For we discover (v20)

- **"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 father day in/out scanning horizon? He never gave up hope - one day his wandering son would return
- **"he ran"** to meet him: yes, he hikes up his robes and runs at top speed to greet his son - all so undignified for an aged oriental - it was not the done thing for an older man to show his leg!. The father it has been suggested acts like 'a manic

daddy'. But so what? He loves his son. Note too that the father took the initiative – there was no waiting for an apology. The father 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 - not putting out his cheek - he gave him a good thumping kiss. According to some scholars, the manic daddy suddenly acts like a loving mummy – the father abandons any claims to macho honour, and instead is overcome with effeminate affection.

BUT that wasn't all. The father, far from treating his son like a hired hand, calls out: 'Get him a three-piece suit, tasseled loafers and a dozen new shirts. Put a ring on his finger, my own signet ring. Sell the stock portfolio and let's party tonight!' Well that's the way one preacher puts it.

Literally he says (v22)

- **"bring the best robe and put it on him"** = a sign of honour. Cf. OBE! When a king wanted to reward a deserving official, presented him with costly robe.
- **"put a ring on his finger"**: i.e. a signet ring was sign of authority – with a signet ring you were able to seal documents.
- **"put shoes on his feet"**: shoes were a mark of freedom. Shoes were a luxury - slaves went barefoot, but shoes worn by free men and women
- **"go and get the prize [fatted] calf and kill it"**: you could get ten goats for the price of one cow. In other words, to kill a calf was to put on the grandest of parties.

What a welcome! There are no recriminations. No 'I told you so'. No stern lectures or demands for an apology. No, it is champagne all round – 'Welcome home son, well and truly'. What a story.

But this is more than make-believe - it is more than a mere story.

Jesus is saying: God is waiting to welcome us home - as 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.

God doesn't just wait - he has already taken the initiative – he sent his Son to die for us...

YET he 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 good things he wants to give.

### 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 goes on to tell of 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.

Look at the context. In Luke 15.1f we read **"One day when many tax collectors and other outcasts were came to listen to Jesus, the Pharisees and 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 of the day...

At this point we, the religious, hopefully begin to feel uncomfortable.

For surely the elder brothers provides 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 - but 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. And the fact that our sins have perhaps been less colourful and apparently less outrageous does not 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. In the words of Helmut Thielicke: *‘What a wretched thing it is to call oneself a Christian and yet be a stranger and a grumbling servant in the Father’s house’*. And yet amazingly there are such people – indeed, I’ve known people stop coming to church because they can’t stand new people. We need to rejoice when we see people coming to faith. Klyne Snodgrass puts it this way: *‘Joy is not an optional feature of the faith, nor can it be attained by smiling more and singing louder. It must emerge from an awareness of the mercy and forgiveness of God...’*
- 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.