

Heading Home

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C, 30th March 2025

Joshua 5.2-12, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5.16-21, Luke 15.11-32

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

Jesus, the storyteller, said, 'There was a man who had two sons ...'

In the man - the father - Jesus shows us an aspect of God, and we might pause right here at the beginning of this well-known parable of the "prodigal son" and consider who this parent figure is to us. The father of the parable presides over an abundant land and provides generously for his children. On this Mothering Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent, we might also find in this earthiness, the embrace of God as mother - the source of security, ever welcoming with food, drink and shelter – our divine parent ever ready to embrace us with joy.

The custom of Mothering Sunday, dates from medieval times when people were encouraged to return to their mother church – the church of their baptism – during Lent. It was revived in the UK by Constance Adelaide Smith in 1913 in response to the introduction of Mother's Day in America. Instead of the May date, she linked the concept to the traditional fourth Sunday in Lent, producing a play, a history and a booklet about Mothering Sunday which she saw as a celebration, not only of Mother Church, but of our earthly homes, of Mary, mother of Jesus, and of Mother Nature.ⁱ Touchingly, she never married or had children herself. One of the traditions of Mothering Sunday – also known as Refreshment Sunday - is simnel cake - a rich fruity cake, providing a break from the rigours of Lenten fasting (ahem!)

So, it is wonderful to combine Mothering Sunday with its themes of homing and nourishment with the parable that has become known as the return of the prodigal son which only occurs in Luke's gospel. The word prodigal doesn't appear in the text, but we use it to describe the dissolute behaviour of the younger footloose son as he squanders his inheritance. The word prodigal, however, has several shades of meaning – it can mean recklessly wasteful but also lavishly generous, abundant, and bounteous. In this second sense, the father is also prodigal – so much so that the elder dutiful hardworking son, that stayed at home, resents the rich feast held to celebrate the return of his repentant brother. But in the world turning upside down logic of Jesus, when it comes to love and forgiveness, it is deeply good to be 'wasteful' - 'foolish' even. Our God is "a spendthrift lover who never counts the cost"ⁱⁱⁱ and we are also to love 'recklessly' in return - all four gospels, for example, contain a variation on the story of the woman criticized for the extravagance of anointing Jesus with an entire jar of expensive perfume.

But before we get to the point of feasting – before we can imbibe the fullness of life from our source – we need to turn our hearts and our feet homeward. Today's four readings all contain the thread of reconciliation as a form of homecoming. The Israelites, after all their wanderings, pause to ritually prepare before entering the promised land; Psalm 32 describes the embrace of mercy and the joyful release that follows the acknowledgment of brokenness, and Paul speaks of God reconciling the world to himself in Christ, and our part in a new creation – for turning homeward is not going backwards to the old life, but forwards to a new. And finally, the parable of the father who had two sons, where it seems it is not only the 'prodigal' son but the elder son too, who needs a change of heart.

First, the younger son, having reached rock bottom, "came to himself." It is such a succinct phrase, yet it says so much. Coming home, first means coming into ourselves – not simply by seeing sense at last, but coming into an awareness that our essential self – our soul perhaps – is needing attention and care. Revd. Sue's Lenten study frames today's readings as a "coming-to, awakening, a long way from home", and suggests that "while our Lenten journey is not over by any means ... it is time to reflect, to confess to ourselves and to God how far we are from home, from where we want to be, and to intentionally turn toward our home, our source, our Divine Beloved ... In the spiritual life there are times when we need to pause and listen to our heart ... to look around us and realise we are not in the right place for us."ⁱⁱⁱ

When we are not in the right place, we might feel lost, we might have a strange sense of not even knowing ourselves - as though we are somehow exiled from our own life, we might feel off-centre, or cut-off from that which makes us feel fully alive. We may find ourselves seeking forgiveness. We might feel we have squandered our gifts, our years, opportunities, relationships, or any other precious things we have not valued or protected. Where did it all go?

Looking beyond ourselves, what have we as a nation or indeed a species squandered? The list is a little overwhelming – indigenous cultures and wisdom, the forests of the earth, the once teeming life of the seas, the atmosphere of the very planet we live on. The physicist Brian Cox put things in perspective for the delegates to COP26, in saying it is almost certain that ours is the *only* star in the cosmos where the conditions for life are so perfectly balanced as to support not only life but intelligence –the only place where the wonder of abundant life is given witness by sentient beings.^{iv} In our tradition we might say this is the only place where songs of praise are lifted. And yet we continue to tip that balance and squander this astonishing gift with greed, willful ignorance and indifference. Will we come to ourselves in time.

Returning to our story, the younger son’s turning is in some ways a simpler one than the elder’s. It is really obvious he’s not in a good place or on the right track, and obvious what he needs to do. The scene of reconciliation is dramatic and decisive – what is lost is now found – and just cause for celebration. This might be a slightly cheeky thought, but might it be simpler for the prodigal son because he has had a little fun along the way – that being reckless and irresponsible, even a little dissolute for a time – is something of a rite of passage. Do we not as parents give a little smile as our children test the boundaries and grow in self-awareness? We learn from mistakes – but what if we never make mistakes?

The elder son is, in a literal sense, already home – in fact he has never left - yet he is still very far from ‘coming to himself.’ “Those of us,” says Sue, “who end up in the wilderness far from home by being good and responsible sometimes have a harder journey?!” Harder because we tend to be proud or overly busy being responsible or caring of others and our hearts that were once tender have become hardened or depleted.”^v Yes, the elder son that stayed home and tended his father’s fields has obeyed all his father’s commands – but he has lost sight of the joy in this work. He is not guilty of squandering but of its opposite – there is a meanness, and something pinched in his response. There is a self-damaging smallness of spirit that leads him to exclude himself from the feast out of resentment and a sense of being taken for granted – “he became angry and refused to go in.” Perhaps those of us who see ourselves as boringly dutiful also need a time to stop and reflect on where we are – to ask if we are doing what we do with our whole hearts, and if we are locking ourselves out from the feast. If God is inexhaustibly bountiful and infinite in goodness – how can we begrudge another’s share in it – how can we not also be profligate and spendthrift lovers?

Likely, you recognise both the younger and elder son in yourself – conforming then rebelling, knuckling down then running away in a cycle of reaction. Wherever we find ourselves in the parable, the chance to stop, reconsider, and come to ourselves is always open to us. Coming home, we might then know ourselves as possessors of a great inheritance. We might open our hearts to the father’s words: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” All – not just a portion – this inheritance is not of the kind that can be divided up into little parts – it is given in its entirety to all. Each one of us, if you can get your head around it, inherits all of it as a child of God in Christ. All that is our Father-Mother-Creator- Sustainer-Redeemer God’s is ours. And the more of us that can sing praises for that, the greater the party will be. So, as our Lenten journey continues, let us re-find the energy and the joy that comes from being part of the new creation, in which we each have a ministry of reconciliation, and all children are welcomed home to the feast with open arms.

ⁱ Constance Adelaide Smith, *The Revival of Mothering Sunday* (1921)

ⁱⁱ *A spendthrift lover is the Lord* (hymn) by Thomas Henry Troeger

ⁱⁱⁱ Sue Lodge-Calvert Lent Year C: The Path of Descent. <https://www.companionsontheway.com/post/lent-year-c-worship-course>. *Week Four: Coming -to, Awakening, a Long way from Home*. p. 32.

^{iv} *Earth’s demise could rid galaxy of meaning, warns Brian Cox ahead of Cop26*. The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/oct/19/earths-demise-could-rid-galaxy-of-meaning-warns-brian-cox-ahead-of-cop26>

^v Sue Lodge-Calvert, *ibid.*, p. 33