

COME HOME Dr. Paul Beasley Murray

Luke 15.1-3, 11-32

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

The 'home' we are looking at today isn't the place where your parents live, or where your family lives, but the place where God is found, and where his family is found.

This parable is usually called 'The Prodigal Son', but the centre of the story is not the son, but the Father – not man's unfaithfulness, but God's faithfulness. So the story is not so much about the prodigal son, but the waiting father.

Is home a comforting thought for you? Is it a place where you can relax and be yourself? For some, (especially perhaps the young), home can seem restrictive, or maybe just free bed and board.

THE PRODIGAL SON - The good life is not what it's cracked up to be

The Prodigal Son wanted his freedom. The thought of being able to do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, and to have money to do it with, was enticing. Perhaps he also wanted adventure – something not to be found at home. So he asked his father for his share of the estate – in those times, as a younger son, his share was one third, while his older brother would get two thirds. He wanted his third, and he wanted it NOW.

Have you ever had the desire to be free of restrictions, free of other people's expectations, free to have adventures? What does freedom mean to you?

The son didn't want to wait until his father died. What he did, was very offensive – to his father and his brother, but he didn't care. He set off to have a good time, to a far away country, where his father and brother couldn't interfere.

But, unfortunately for him, things didn't turn out as he expected. First, he ran out of money – why?

Then, along came a famine. How did he manage to survive?

The only job available to him was caring for pigs. Leviticus 11.7-8. The Jews were not allowed to eat pork, or even to touch the flesh of a pig. They would scorn and shun anyone who worked with pigs. The rabbis used to say, 'cursed be the man who would breed swine.'

But there was no one to help this son, and he was so hungry he even wanted to eat the pods that he was feeding to the pigs. He was in a very sorry state. In fact, he probably did eat some of the pods. This was the lowest he could go.

Do you know someone who has run away from God? Maybe at some time you may have done so. Is God restrictive? Is life away from him freedom? Or is freedom from God not what it's cracked up to be?

The bright lights of the city may be attractive, but the freedom to please yourself isn't always the good life. Why?

But what about work, education, family – these are good things, but they aren't an end in themselves – they too can pull us away from God. Can you think of other things that are good, but can be harmful if we focus on them rather than on God?

Finally the prodigal came to his senses. He saw things as they really were. We may think we are self sufficient, until things go wrong and we see the facts. At last the son saw the facts and went back home – not to be a son, but to be a servant.

THE WAITING FATHER – God waits to welcome us home

How did his father respond to him? He had been waiting and watching for his son's return – he saw him, his heart filled with compassion, he hitched up his robe and ran to meet him. (No self respecting Jewish father would have done such a thing – thought some of Jesus' hearers.) This was undignified behaviour. Did he wait for an apology?

No, he threw his arms around his son and kissed him.

The father is the true hero of this story. He called his servants to bring the best robe for his son – a sign of honour . 'Bring a ring for his finger.' This was a sign of authority. 'Bring sandals for his feet' – a mark of freedom. Shoes were not worn by servants, but by free men and women

'Go get the fattened calf, kill it, and let's have a party to welcome my boy home.'

What should Jesus' listeners have learned from the father's behaviour?

Some would have thought it was ridiculous, but Jesus was telling them that God loves and welcomes us when we come to him. It doesn't matter what we have done, when we realize the truth, repent, and return, he is there to welcome us home with joy.

He doesn't compel us to come, it's our choice, but he waits, longing for our return,

THE OLDER BROTHER – There is no place for religious one-upmanship

The older brother was full of resentment. He was so angry he wouldn't go into the house. This part of the story is really important, Why?

Who was listening to Jesus telling the story? 15.1-2. What was their attitude towards Jesus?

Jesus knew what their attitude was, and the story was for them to hear and to learn how God acts towards sinners,

So the older brother represents the religious people of the day – and perhaps of our day as well. ‘There is no place for religious one-up-manship’, said Dr. Beasley Murray. What does this mean?

The prodigal wasn’t the only one who needed to repent. He may have been lost in a far country, but the older brother was lost in his own self-righteousness.

Over the centuries, religious people have also been lost in this way. Can you think of some examples?

Was the older brother’s attitude also part of the reason his brother left home? Can Christians by their attitude cause their brother/sister to turn away from the Father? Have Christians ever been intolerant, self-righteous, or smug as the Pharisees were?

We need to look at ourselves and check our attitudes towards others, whether they are our brothers and sisters, or non-Christians. Yes, the younger son had to take responsibility for his actions, and he did. But so did the older brother need to recognize his own sin.

How sad, if people miss out on knowing the Father’s love for them, because of his people’s lack of love. Are we ever hard-hearted, judgmental, smug, or self-righteous? Hopefully not,

But whatever our sin, God waits to welcome us home – and remember, while the older brother was living at home, he was just as estranged from his father and the younger brother,

Notice too, that the father in the parable didn’t rebuke the older son, instead, he showed his love and forgiveness to him as well, 15,31.

What is your reaction to this parable?