

The Prodigal Son

(A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, 16 Feb 2003)

I'm sure you all know the story of the prodigal son. It is one of the best known and best loved parts of the teaching of Jesus. 'The Prodigal Son' is the title it's traditionally been given. Not every one is happy with that title. People have often pointed out that if it were only the story of the prodigal son, then the story could end well before the point at which it actually ends. The last part of the story is about the prodigal's elder brother. So maybe we should call it the story of the two sons. But what about the father? Isn't the father in the end the central character who holds the whole plot together? The prodigal father - it has been suggested we call it. I think in the end it's best to see it as a story about a family, about three people who all belong to each other. It's a story about the relationship of the younger son to his father, about the father's relationships to both his sons, about the elder son's relationships to his father and his brother. Like many a family we know, it's a rather dysfunctional family. Relationships are not easy and have to be dealt with.

Let's start with the younger son. A rebellious adolescent. What he wants at the beginning of the story is independence. He wants his inheritance because he wants to get away from home and live his own life. He feels his commitments to home and family as unbearable restrictions he must throw off. Like all adolescents, he has trouble with his parents. Doing what his father wants of him cramps his style. He wants out. He takes himself off as far from home as he can get - in search of a life for himself.

We shouldn't be too hard on him. His desire for independence is not only characteristic of adolescents, who need to assert their independence, and often hurt their parents thoughtlessly. It takes a rather extreme form in this case. But we could say that that extreme drive for independence, to throw off commitments and ties, to set off on one's own, to find a life of one's own - is characteristic of our whole culture. An extreme case in his time, the prodigal son now represents normality. Our culture has gone all out for individual freedom. Independence and choice are - I was going to say desires, but people now see them as rights, rather as the prodigal did. He didn't think in demanding his inheritance was asking a favour. He had a right to it and a right to do as wished with it. In our culture people feel they've a right to freedom, free choice, independence - and ties and commitments that reduce freedom and restrict choice are avoided as encumbrances.

In the twenty-first century west the prodigal son's behaviour doesn't seem nearly as shocking as it would have done to Jesus' hearers. He's also typical of our society - rather than his own - in his impatience. He can't wait for his father to die. He wants the good things of life NOW. When Access first launched their credit card, they used the highly successful slogan: 'Take the waiting out of wanting.' That's exactly how the prodigal son felt, and he went on, like every prodigal user of credit cards, to seek his happiness in spending. He's the prime biblical case of consumerism.

He must have gone to a city: he could never have got through all his money so quickly in the country, where there simply wasn't much to spend it on. In the city he no doubt went from one thing to another. What money can buy isn't usually very

satisfying, but where there are all kinds of different things money can buy, it's easy to miss that, because if one kind of purchase doesn't fill the yearning gap in our lives, there are always plenty more to try.

So there he is, spending his last pennies on the merry-go-round of consumerist pleasure, when suddenly it grinds to a halt. All the bright lights go out. Everything stops. In the parable there's a famine. The prodigal can only survive, literally *survive*, by selling his labour to a pig-farmer. The farmer is supposed to keep him in return for his labour. In fact, he gets next to nothing to eat - and can't argue, he's nowhere else to go.

The picture of his degradation is pitiful: feeding the pigs (unclean animals for a Jew) and envying them their pig swill. This is where his independence has got him in the end. But here, at the end of the road he took when he left home, the parable says: 'he came to himself.' A little phrase of great significance. What does it mean? 'He came to his senses' - say some of the translations. But it means a bit more than that, I think. He came to *himself* - that is, he realised who he really was. For the first time in a long time he remembers where he came from and that that is where he really belongs.

Probably when he left home he had some idea of *finding himself* - at last he could be his own person, make his own choices, be whoever he wanted to be. But that route to finding himself ended in the pig sties. Human beings have a deep need for freedom but they also have a deep need for belonging. The prodigal had thought of freedom as the kind of independence which is incompatible with belonging. He thought to be free he had to break of the ties that bound him to home and family. Our society has done the same. It has defined freedom in a way that contradicts belonging, and there are a lot of very lonely people who have secured their independence of others, terrified of being defined or tied down by other people, sought freedom in choosing and buying at will and at whim, and become quite familiar with the prodigal's pig swill. There is a kind of freedom that contradicts belonging, and, yes, also a kind of belonging that contradicts freedom, but those are not the kinds of freedom and belonging the Bible commends to us. True freedom is found only together with belonging and vice versa.

The prodigal comes to himself - his true self that he'd been escaping from ever since he left home - when he remembers home and father and realises that that's where he truly belongs. It's not an easy realisation because, of course, he pretty much burned his boats when he left. The whole village would have been scandalized by his behaviour. In demanding what he should have waited till his father's death to inherit, he more or less wished his father dead. And now he's wasted the whole of what he took from the family estate.

So he does not expect to recover what he had lost. He will plead with his father to let him be one of the hired labourers on the estate - the people who were paid a day at a time and had no security of employment, often no more than a day's work away from starvation, but still better off than the prodigal was keeping the pigs. He plans to say to his father, no doubt he carefully rehearses it: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hand's.' Something you might have missed in the extraordinary welcome he actually gets from his father is that this speech is cut short. He only gets as far as 'I am no longer worthy to be called your son,' when his father interrupts him with the

instructions he gives to the servant to bring the robe, the ring, the sandals, and prepare for the celebration. All these things are recognition that he is indeed his father's *son*, and is being welcomed home as the son, nothing less, the son who was lost and is found. It was quite beyond what he had dreamed possible.

Someone has said that home is where someone is waiting for you. To his astonishment the prodigal son found that his father had indeed been waiting for him. And in his father's loving embrace he learns what he had never properly known before: that he and his father belong together. He has not lost his freedom. Rather he truly finds it as he takes up again his position in the household as his father's son. We are most free where we feel at home and it is with those who love us that we feel at home.

I said that the prodigal's attitude to freedom when he demanded his inheritance and left home was much like our twenty-first century western society's view of freedom. That ideal of absolute independence drives not only people's uncommitted, keeping their distance from others, but also the way that most contemporary people are very concerned to keep their distance from God. God is perceived as a threat to freedom. People like to think they are spiritual, but not that they need commit themselves in any way to a God who might restrict their freedom.

For such people to find God is, like the prodigal, to come to themselves, to find, for the first time, that their *true* self is not to be found in pursuit of total independence, but in remembering where they truly belong and to whom they truly belong. In the homelessness of our society it's an experience of coming home. Too many people, sadly, have never known anything worth calling a home, where someone is waiting for them. But God is. Like the father in the parable he runs to meet them, embraces them, and gives them the freedom of his home.

It's time we turned to the figure of the father in the parable. He's probably not what Jesus' hearers would have expected. The head of a household was supposed to be a dignified figure of authority, used to people doing as he said. This father probably surprises Jesus' audience from the word go, when, instead of putting his foot down and maintaining his right to his property until death, he lets the younger son have his way. He sees there's no point in stopping him, no point in trying to tell him what's really good for him. It's exactly that - other people always knowing what's good for him - that the son is trying to get away from.

The father would have surprised Jesus' audience again in a detail you might not have noticed: when he sees his son returning home, the father *runs* to meet him. In those days mature and dignified men, heads of households, did not run. We can see in that detail the overwhelming force of this father's love for his son. If he runs to meet his son, then one can hardly be surprised that he has no word of reproach or condemnation, nothing but totally unconditional welcome.

For third occasion on which the father fails to conform to the cultural model of the authoritarian patriarch we have to continue with the story to the point when the elder son refuses to join in the celebrations. He stays outside the house, and his father comes out and pleads with him. Fathers do not plead, they command. But this father

pleads. He reflects the Father God who constantly surprises us with his patience, his compassion and his gentle, non-coercive love.

So what of the father's elder son, the one who did not rebel, stayed home, worked hard, did whatever his father wanted? The sad thing is that one respect he was just like his brother: neither of them realised how much their father loved them. If the elder son had really known his father, could he have complained as he did: 'For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.' To which the father replies, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.'

If the elder son had realised his father really loved him, that the proof of this was to be had every day of his life, had he only noticed it, and did not need to be demonstrated by a special celebration, then he would not have been angry at the way his long-lost brother was received. But the elder son had seen his father as an employer more than as a father - someone for whom he worked hard, and from whom he therefore expected the appropriate wages. Love didn't come into it. So of course he thinks it unfair that such a fuss should be made of his brother, who'd already had all of his inheritance *without earning* it, and after squandering it all comes back to all the rights and privileges of a son.

The father's last words to his elder son, the last words of the parable, are crucial: 'we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' 'this brother of yours' - the elder son himself had spoken of 'this son of yours' (scornfully, dissociating himself from both his brother and his father), but the father corrects him: 'this brother of yours.' It's not only my son who was given up for dead and has returned; it's your brother who was dead and is alive, was lost and has been found. Shouldn't you be rejoicing too?

You see, the elder son has a chance to understand the extent of his father's love. He's missed it in his own case, not noticed it, but now he can't help seeing his father's scarcely credible love for his younger son. Can he himself step inside that circle of love, become part of it? Easily, if he recognizes his brother as *his brother*, joins in the celebrations for his brother's homecoming.

For the elder brother, his coming to himself must be not only realising that he belongs to his father, but also that he belongs to his brother. The story leaves us guessing whether he will do this. Or perhaps it invites some of those who hear it, those who identify with the elder son, to come to that realization - to see, that is, how God welcomes others with totally unconditional love, to see what God's love means in someone else's case, and thereby to see that God's love creates a family of those who belong to him and because they belong to him also belong to each other. That's a different form of homecoming, but it is also a way home.