

St Brandon's Ash Weds 23.

The Long Way Home

Luke 15: 11-32

Let's just let that story sink in a little.

Thank you Hester for reading it to us so beautifully.

There may be a phrase or aspect which struck you especially; something you'd never heard quite so clearly before. If that's so, take hold of it, meditate on it and allow God's Word to challenge and change you as we embark today on the journey of Lent.

The part that has struck me is about a journey, and so I've called this short talk, '**The Long Way Home**'. I borrow that title from Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal*, based on Rembrandt's powerful and moving painting of the end of this story. There's a copy of the book on the font, and some postcards of the painting too. Please take a postcard home with you if you'd find it helpful as an aid to prayer. I acknowledge that much of my talk has its roots in reading and re-reading Nouwen's book, at different stages of my own faith journey. So I've chosen this evening to speak at times in the first person, to use 'I' rather than 'we', just as Nouwen does, and in this, I hope it may resonate with you.

The aspects of the younger son's **Long Way Home** – and ours too- which I want us to look at can helpfully be thought of through three Rs – sorry, once a teacher, always a teacher!

Here's the first R, REPENTANCE.

As Christians we use this word quite frequently, especially in Lent. To repent is to turn round, make a U turn, face back to God rather than following my own way. Head Home. One of the problems I have when I read this story is that I tend to compare myself to the prodigal son, reassure myself that I've never lived as dissolutely as he did but have generally kept the rules and been a good Christian, and so *I* don't need to repent anything like as much as he did...

My U turn becomes a slight rerouting to get me back on track, more a minor diversion than a fresh start.

I fail to see that I am always 'leaving home', every time I trust in myself and my own resources rather than in God's grace; every time I look for love and affirmation in status, popularity, achievement or image, rather than in the love of God my Father.

When I behave like this, in roaming far and wide to find self-acceptance, I deny the spiritual reality that I already have a home, as a beloved child of God.

No, I too need to come to my senses, be honest about where I am, head home to God.

That's what **repentance** means.

But even then, I like to do deals with God and myself.

Which is why the second R is so crucial. It's RECEIVING.

Receiving God's love which is unconditional,
trusting that I am loved, eternally, completely,
without measure.

The problem, as we sang a few moments ago, is that I make God's love too narrow, by false limits of my own.

Our experiences of human forgiveness may lead us to think that the best we can expect when we are forgiven, is to be taken back on worse terms than before – not as a child but as a hired hand, just as the son in the story calculated. I think I'll need to earn my way back into my friend/sibling/parent/partner or God's good books. In fact, trying to do a deal like that might even make me feel a bit better, that I can somehow regain control and merit forgiveness!

No, I need to RECEIVE from God, to come 'just as I am' and to allow God to welcome me home, embrace me and clothe me in the best robe, taking away the rags of my waywardness and sin, forgiving me.

I need to receive this – God will never force it upon me.

It is in the receiving of God's love that we discover the reality of REBIRTH , which is our third and final R.

In Rembrandt's painting, the son is still wearing his small sword or dagger – he hasn't sold it. This may be, tragically, because as someone who is penniless and homeless, he faces daily dangers, then as now, but it is also a symbol of his sonship, which he has not sold but

held on to. In his despair and destitution he has remembered who he is, his childhood and his home.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, he tries to come back as an adult, an employee. How often do we think of ourselves like that, I wonder, as servants or slaves of God rather than children? Servants who do our duty and earn God's love... Yes I know, St Paul describes himself as a slave of Christ, but he also writes of his rebirth as God son, of his inheritance as God's child, and of God's love from which nothing can separate him.

The father in the story is having none of the prodigal's plans. He welcomes him back as his son, always his son, for that has never, ever changed, despite the son's behaviour.

The broken can only truly return home as the son or daughter of God, as a child. It's the same for all of us.

The Father rushes out to meet him and he's not ready. He's only prepared the first sentence of his repentance speech. He'll never be ready, we'll never be either, because there is no deal to be done.

We can only **receive** God's forgiveness, and be **reborn** as God's children.

In Rembrandt's painting, the kneeling son's head has been shaved: a sign of his poverty and humiliation.

But Nouwen also tells of a mother looking at the painting, who saw in this bowed head, its face leaning in, pressed into the father's chest a fragile baby, a newborn child.

Jesus talked often of our need to be like children, to be born again. That phrase may have too many connotations for us of TV evangelists, so let me take you instead to Charles Wesley and George Herbert.

Wesley's great carol *Hark the Herald* contains the line

'born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth' The forgiveness and new life which Jesus came to bring give us 'second birth' as the beloved children of God.

A restoration of who we are and how we were created to live.

George Herbert, in a poem which Martin brought to Evensong last Sunday, describes Prayer, our spiritual encounter with God, as

God's breath in man returning to his birth.

The Long Way Home, through **repentance** to **receiving** God's scandalous forgiveness and unconditional love, leads to our **rebirth** as God's children, restored and set free into eternal life.

May that be the Journey we travel, the Long Way Home, this Lent.

I close with a prayer written by Nicola Slee about this passage.

God of unconditional love

Long before we were ready you ran to meet us
and embraced us;

When we did not deserve it

You lavished your love upon us.

teach us how to receive your embrace

And how to extend it,

with compassion and generosity

to the others we find hard to forgive.

Amen.