

The Feast of the Father Luke 15:11-32

When a little boy returned home from his first time away on a school trip, his parents asked him, “Didn’t you get homesick whilst you were away?” The little boy just shrugged his shoulders and answered, “No, not me, but some of the kids who have dogs did.”

It’s good to know where you are in the pecking order of the family, isn’t it? But the reality is that some place which we class as home is where we do really long to be – look at all those people who were stranded in foreign countries because of the volcanic ash cloud. Now sure, some of them wanted to get back to the office or to their social life, but how did they express that? They all said, “I just want to get – home.”

Home is somewhere where we feel secure, we belong, we can just be ourselves, home is important to us and, did you know that one of the big themes of the Bible is exile and homecoming; being away from home and then returning to home? And that bleeds through into our everyday lives because fundamentally, we are all homesick.

Why do I say that? Well, be honest with me, are you really content? Really and constantly? Isn’t there always just a little niggle that creeps in? Even on the best days, isn’t there always a tiny fly in the ointment? Summer is coming and you might be looking forward to some time away – you might have saved up all year for it and be spending it with the people you love most – or by yourself.

But listen, no matter how good it is; no matter how relaxing or adventurous, or cultural, or fun, your holiday will not be perfect 24 hours a day, seven days a week, even for just a fortnight.

If you have a time in your life which you look back on as being perfect, can I assure you that it wasn't. At the time you were often dissatisfied, frustrated, angry and irritated, you're just looking back with rose tinted spectacles.

In reality we have a constant nagging feeling that (even in the most wonderful times) things are not quite perfect. The 20th century philosopher Heidegger called it "unheimlichkeit" – it means, "eeriness", "uncanniness", literally, the feeling of being "away from home". We have that sense that we are not truly comfortable with this life – that there is something fundamentally wrong and broken with the world.

Now, for Christians, that really resonates because the Bible's great theme of exile and homecoming confirms to us that people are indeed exiled from home.

Let's prove that. Come with me back to the beginning of the Bible and to our series last year on Genesis. Now, do you remember what happened? Of course you do. Humanity was living in communion with God, in the Garden of Eden and all was well because every desire that we had was met by our relationship with God, with each other and with the work that we were carrying out.

But then we sinned. Just like the younger brother in the story Jesus told, we chafed under the authority of the Father – we wanted his things, but not him and we rebelled against God and so humanity was exiled from Eden. Like the younger son we thought that we were heading off to a wild and exciting life of independence, and like the younger son we soon discovered that instead we were to end up living in a pig sty.

That's what the human condition is; we are living away from home and it's rubbish. Listen, do you know the movie "The Lion King"? Maybe you've seen it, maybe you've seen the musical.

The movie begins with a wonderful song; “The circle of life” and a little way through the film the lion cub (Simba) asks his father all about it – what is the “circle of life”? His father explains that they are locked into a circle of life with all the other animals. “But father,” protests the lion cub, “don’t we eat the antelope?”

It’s a good point, Simba sees a pyramid rather than a circle, a pyramid which they are at the top of. But his father corrects him, because you see, the lions die too and when they die they fertilise the grass lands and the antelope eat the grass – so the lions eat the antelope but then the antelope eat the lions. Isn’t that wonderful? Doesn’t that just make you want to burst into song?

No! Of course not! Any world where everyone you have ever known and loved will become nothing more than fertiliser – where one day you will become nothing more than fertiliser strikes us as simply wrong.

We are in exile, we are not in our rightful home we have a sense of “Unheilichkeit.”

But look at what happens in the story Jesus told, in verse 17 the younger son “came to his senses”. The Greek gives us a sense of “he came to himself” – he “came to”, he “woke up” – light dawned, the younger son realised what he had done; that he was an outcast, and he realised that he needed to go home.

What Jesus was talking about here was repentance. Now, Lord Byron once said “Only the weak repent” – but he was totally wrong wasn’t he? Repentance isn’t a sign of weakness, sitting sullenly in the pigs’ mess because he couldn’t bring himself to apologise for his actions would have been a sign of weakness, no repentance is a sign of strength.

And I want us to notice how the younger brother repents. Take a look at verse 18, because there the younger son tells us what he is going to say to his father, “I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.”

Now, you’re saying, “Hang on just a minute, he sinned against the father, it should be the father alone he apologises to.” But he’s right, first and foremost the younger son has sinned against God. When you or I sin against someone we are sinning against God first – all our sin is primarily a sin against God.

Remember Psalm 51? It’s the psalm of repentance David wrote after his sin had been revealed; he had slept with another man’s wife and then had the other man murdered in battle to cover up the fact that the affair has resulted in pregnancy.

So, what does David say in Psalm 51? “Have mercy on me, O God...Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” What about Uriah, whose wife David slept with and whom David then had murdered? Surely David had sinned against him too?

Well, yes, but first and foremost the sin is against God, any sin, whether it affects another person or not, whether it is discovered by other people or not is against God and so we have to congratulate the younger son because he has things in the right order – the vertical and the horizontal; the vertical; “I have sinned against God” and the horizontal; “I have sinned against you”.

And it is this incredibly strong and genuine act of repentance which makes forgiveness possible.

So what does the father do in response?

Well, what happens when any family is reunited? You have a meal. And in Jesus' story the centrepiece of the parable is the great feast which the father throws; it has the greatest of delicacies all wrapped up with music and dancing.

The younger brother didn't expect a great homecoming did he? He knew that he had rebelled against the father, insulted him, let him down, disgraced him. The younger brother returned home determined to earn his way back into his father's favour.

But the father "fell on his neck", he "threw his arms around him" or as The Message puts it, ""When [the younger son] was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him."

The younger brother didn't expect a welcome home party – but that's what he got and when he is asked to explain the party the father says, "we had to celebrate" – there was no choice, no alternative, no option. Why not? Why was the feast so important? Because nothing says "Your home!" more than a family feast.

And Jesus tells us about the feast here because he wants us to grasp that one day God will bring us home and that our homecoming will be marked by a great feast, Jesus tells us in Matthew 8, "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 8:11)

Jesus is pointing us to the great wedding feast of the Lamb in Revelation, where God promises that because of our true elder brother, he will one day make this world our true home again, where he will wipe away every tear, do away with death and make everything new giving us bodies which never grow old and never become weary.

And when we get there, we will say something like the Unicorn said at the end of the Chronicles of Narnia: “I’ve come home at last! I belong here. This is the land I’ve been looking for all my life, though I never knew it!”

Now here at the feast is the wonderful news but also the terrible tragedy of this parable; The wonderful news is that at the end of this parable it is that the son who had walked away from the father, who had lost himself, the one who was dead to the family who is found and is alive. He has returned to father full of repentance and the father’s heart is pounding with joy as he welcomes him back and restores him to the family with a wonderful feast.

But the tragedy is that the elder brother, won’t go in. The elder brother refuses to go in. The father comes out and pleads with him, in the original Greek he calls him “my child” – the father is so tender and loving and yet the older brother doesn’t go in.

You know, some people say, “How do you know that he doesn’t go in? Maybe he does and we’re just not told about it.” Do you know how I know that he doesn’t go in?

Because it’s only a story, it’s not real – nothing happened after these events. Jesus isn’t relaying the record of an actual event, he’s telling us a story and he chose to end it with the elder brother stood outside because of his own pride and self-righteous anger.

Now, why did the elder brother object so much? Because meals signified acceptance and do you remember the complaint levelled against Jesus back in verse 2 of Luke 15? “...the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.’”

If you ate with sinners then you were indicating that you accepted them, if you accepted them then you ran the real danger of becoming like them and so the Jews had developed elaborate dietary laws to prevent themselves from becoming polluted by the practices of their pagan masters as well as their fellow Jews who had slipped from the high religious standards of the Pharisees. And those self same Pharisees were accusing Jesus of accepting sinners.

The elder brother wouldn't go into the feast because he refused to accept the repentant younger brother. How tragic. But, that's not how God wants it to end.

You see, the Pharisees were right, Jesus did accept sinners, the Father sent him to pay the price so that repentant younger brothers could be welcomed back into the family and the feast.

And so the church exists as a place where we can come and experience a taste of the feast to come and the Church of Christ is open to the younger brothers and elder brothers – to all who will repent and come humbly into the feast of the Father.

What is that taste of the feast to come? Well, listen, Jesus left his own true home; heaven – we heard about that last week from Phillipians 2, but Jesus left with his Father's blessing. However, Jesus wandered in this world without a home, Matthew 8:20 is where Jesus says, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." So Jesus experienced our exile experience.

But it got worse because outside the gates of Jerusalem (another sign of exile and rejection) Jesus experienced the full exile which the human race deserved – he was crucified and died – he was alienated and cast out so that we could be brought home.

And when we gather as the Church Community we look back to Jesus' actions and ahead to the feast in heaven in a special family meal; "The Lord's Supper" a meal where God's Holy Spirit makes real our communion with one another and with God.

Speaking of Jesus, Tim Keller says, "Think of it like this—the ultimate son, who was dead and cut off, is now alive again. So we have to celebrate! And the way we celebrate what he has done for us, is to create a new community of forgiven sinners, in which anyone can be a part. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done, it doesn't matter what your race or class or background is. Any repentant sinner can come and be a brother and a sister, because of the death and resurrection of our true elder brother, who took our exile and punishment upon himself."

So when we break bread and share wine and welcome God into our feast by his Holy Spirit, then like Isaiah we're looking forward to what is to come, because Isaiah declared;

"On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken."

That is our Prodigal God, our recklessly extravagant God who has spent everything on us, so that we can all be brought into the awesome heavenly feast of the Father when we recognise our sin and trust in our true elder brother to bring us home rejoicing. Amen.