

## Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 31st March 2019 11am

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### Returning home: a sermon on prodigal sons.

Luke 15: 11-32

Mothering Sunday began several centuries ago as an opportunity for people to return to their Mother Church. Later this became an even more common practice with the vast numbers of people employed in domestic service. Servants would be allowed by their masters and mistresses—and often it was the only time in the year they could so—to leave the Big House and return to their families, to their church, to return home.

So today, Mothering Sunday, is a day for us to return home.

For many of us, of course, home is a very difficult concept to grasp. What does home mean? How can home be experienced?

Today we have heard one of the greatest stories about returning home ever told. And of course it is extremely familiar to us, just as, in a way, it was a familiar story to those who heard Jesus tell it for the first time.

Because in this story Jesus makes use of themes which abound in so many other stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, stories which Jesus' listeners would have been so familiar with. The power of Jesus' parables lie in how Jesus drew out ancient wisdoms to remind the people of the nature of God and of the nature of human relationship and the nature, in this case particularly, of home. And those who listened to Jesus when he told this story for the first time will have listened out for the familiar themes, beginning with the very opening sentence.

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

For me, the story we have heard this morning from Luke's account of the Gospel is a story of two sons. Not *the* prodigal son. Nor even, as the passage is headed in my Bible, the parable of the Prodigal *and* his brother. For me this is the story of the prodigal sons. Plural.

And through the story of the Prodigal Sons, this Mothering Sunday as we contemplate the meaning of returning home, I would like to suggest that we are being asked to reflect especially on the importance of reconciliation, on forgiveness, and through these twin efforts, the presence of the Divine, that which we might call Home.

So: reconciliation, forgiveness, the presence of the Divine, home.

Firstly, reconciliation.

One of the commitments of being a Local Preacher is to engage in continuing local preacher development, a very particular type of CPD! And one of the ways we do this at Hinde Street

is at the start of our Local Preachers Meeting when one of our preachers will lead a short training session. Six months ago the Superintendent of our neighbouring circuit with whom we share our meetings led a session on the three 'lost and found' parables in Luke's account of the Gospel: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. And he encouraged us—as Preachers and as Christians who have heard these stories a thousand times—to really try and search for the little twist, the 'something' that captures our attention in that story and to discuss it with the people sitting next to us.

Now I was sitting next to Peter and Val, which could be a blessing or a curse, depending on how you look at it. When I sat down to write this sermon I tried desperately to remember what Val, Peter, and I had discussed but for the life of me I couldn't remember the details of our conversation so I had to try again. And that's the point – on every reading we should look out for the new insight.

What stuck out for me this time were these moments of reconciliation—the moments which are shared between a father and his two sons.

There are two moments of reconciliation in this story. The first is, of course, when the so-called Prodigal returns home. He has made so many mistakes: he was impatient to get his fair share and to go out into the world and to see it and to enjoy life and who can blame him? But all went wrong all too quickly. And when he returns home, expecting to be admonished, to be treated as anyone but a son, what happens when his father sees him? His father was 'filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.' It is a deeply moving moment of reconciliation.

But there is a second moment of reconciliation. The second moment of reconciliation is when the elder son returns home—the one who stood by his family and his responsibility and his home and all the duties they impose and who continues to work hard out in the field. He returns home, as he does every day, but only to find a party being celebrated for his irresponsible younger brother and he cannot step over the threshold. The younger one felt unworthy to—the other son thinks the threshold now unworthy of him. And how does the father greet this son?

The father doesn't run this time, we presume he walks a little more cautiously. The Gospel writer says: 'His father came out and began to plead with him.'

So these are our two moments of reconciliation: running and pleading, representing two raw emotional reactions. But shouldn't there be a third moment? And this is what stuck out for me this time on this reading of this familiar parable. It's not what's in the parable, it's what's missing. Where is the reconciliation between the brothers?

That's what's missing. The father—and if we accept that the father represents God—forgives and loves and is reconciled with both sons. Of course—because that is the nature of God, as well Jesus' listeners knew. But are the sons prepared to be reconciled with one another?

The Jewish scholar of the New Testament Amy-Jill Levine argues that it is this which Jesus' Jewish listeners would have been listening out for.

There was a father who had two sons.

Their names were Cain and Abel. Cain killed Abel but still Cain fathered the people of God and even the mark of Cain is a mark of God's protection, a reconciliation even with the one who commits the gravest of sins.

There was a father who had two sons.

Their names were Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac was almost sacrificed by his own father. Ishmael was banished by his own father. But Isaac and Ishmael bury their father Abraham together.

There was a father who had two sons.

Their names were Jacob and Esau. One stole the other's birthright. But they are reconciled in some way, again at the grave of their father Isaac.

There was a father who had many sons. But as we have heard this morning Joseph 'could control himself no longer' and embraced the brothers who cast him away and together they were God's Holy people.

There was a father who had two sons.

And what of these two prodigal sons? The father demonstrates that both brothers are lost – both sons are prodigal – both are far from home. But both sons are loved – and without one, the family is incomplete, and so they are both welcomed home.

So the question Jesus asks us, is left for us to answer: how are we to be reconciled to one another?

How are we to express the love that is to be shared in our family, in our church, in our community?

How are we to heal a national home which is divided?

It has something to do, I think, with forgiveness.

The American novelist Marilynne Robinson wrote in her novel *Home* of the dying Congregational minister the Revd Robert Boughton. The minister's wayward son Jack Boughton returns home. Jack Boughton is the son who left home, who as a white man fathered a child with an African-American woman (the novel is set in the American Midwest in the 1950s), and Jack now returns home on his father's deathbed seeking something, reconciliation perhaps.

And at one point Jack Boughton's sister, Mercy, the child who stayed at home all her life and who nurses their father in death says this:

'There is a saying that to understand is to forgive, but that is an error, so Papa used to say. You must forgive in order to understand. Until you forgive, you defend yourself against the possibility of understanding [...] If you forgive, he would say, you may indeed still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace.'

I am fascinated by this – that the aged minister, the patriarch of the family, who has preached a thousand sermons on love and forgiveness and reconciliation, cannot be reconciled towards his own son. Because he cannot understand. But forgiveness comes first. Love always comes first.

And the reason this is so difficult—for the Revd Boughton and for us—is because so often the truth of any situation is so far from what we had imagined – life gets in the way of our dreams – and reality when we are confronted with it is a painful and a terrifying thing.

But into that unreality steps the person who needs our help, seeking our love, asking for our forgiveness, trying to return home.

And we are left to respond. How?

Well there was a father who had two sons. And the father exemplifies how to express the grace reconciliation. In doing so the father does not wait for the sons to come to him. On both occasions it is the father who leaves the traditional understanding of home in order to find reconciliation, to express love, and in his embrace he demonstrates that both sons are returned home. So for us too, the challenge is to step over the familiar threshold, to reach out, to actively seek reconciliation, not to sit and wait for it to happen, but to run with outstretched arms or to walk slowly but surely to put love into action.

Home is a difficult concept to grasp. Home might not be what we always thought it to be. Home is perhaps not where the heart is, as the saying goes. Home is, rather, where our heart ought to be, running to the lost son who is returned, pleading with the other son who turns his face away, and finding—not just in our dreams but in our reality too—reconciliation, forgiveness, understanding, and love, that is, the Divine itself.

So we come to the final point: that in our search for Home—in our path towards reconciliation—and in the glimpse of love—there is the presence of God.

And that is, in a way, what we are searching for this Lent. In our daily journey towards the Cross, in communities which feel torn apart, in a world which faces existential questions which no one seems to be answering, in our own lives which are so full of pain and challenge, we are increasingly acknowledging and confronting the truth that life is hard.

But we are called to journey through this time—confronting the truth and searching for change—in the promise that it is in this very darkness—as we journey into reconciliation with our neighbours and the embrace of love—that the light of the Resurrection promises to break.

One final story.

I happened to be in Jerusalem for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armistice, the end of the Great War. I was leading a group of clergy at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre, and during our stay we were invited by the British Consulate to join their Remembrance ceremony. So we made our way to the British and Commonwealth Cemetery.

The cemetery, which stands on a green hillside, bordered with rose bushes, is the final home for the graves of two and a half thousand British and Commonwealth soldiers of the Great War. Men, many of whom younger than me, fathers, sons, brothers, who left their homes and whose graves now peer towards the sun which rises over Jerusalem itself.

On our way there, I read to our group a story by Rudyard Kipling about a woman who travels to the Western Front soon after the end of the Great War, to find her way to a particular grave. For me this story represents the promise that in stepping out into whatever affliction we can find our way home into reconciliation and the presence of God: that is love itself.

*Helen walked alone to Hagenzeele Third. The place was still in the making, and stood some five or six feet above the metalled road, which it flanked for hundreds of yards. Culverts across a deep ditch served for entrances through the unfinished boundary wall. She climbed a few woodenfaced earthen steps and then met the entire crowded level of the thing in one held breath. She did not know that Hagenzeele Third counted twenty-one thousand dead already. All she saw was a merciless sea of black crosses, bearing little strips of stamped tin at all angles across their faces. She could distinguish no order or arrangement in their mass; nothing but a waist-high wilderness as of weeds stricken dead, rushing at her. She went forward, moved to the left and the right hopelessly, wondering by what guidance she should ever come to her own. A great distance away there was a line of whiteness. It proved to be a block of some two or three hundred graves whose headstones had already been set, whose flowers were planted out, and whose new-sown grass showed green. Here she could see clear-cut letters at the ends of the rows, and, referring to her slip, realized that it was not here she must look.*

*A man knelt behind a line of headstones - evidently a gardener, for he was firming a young plant in the soft earth. She went towards him, her paper in her hand. He rose at her approach and without prelude or salutation asked: "Who are you looking for?"*

*"Lieutenant Michael Turrell - my nephew", said Helen slowly and word for word, as she had many thousands of times in her life.*

*The man lifted his eyes and looked at her with infinite compassion before he turned from the fresh-sown grass toward the naked black crosses.*

*"Come with me", he said, "and I will show you where your son lies."*

*When Helen left the Cemetery she turned for a last look. In the distance she saw the man bending over his young plants; and she went away, supposing him to be the gardener.*