

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Coming Home Lent 4C 31st March 2019

Linton, 8 am.

Joshua 5.9-12 Luke 15,1-3, 11b-32

Both of our Bible readings today were about coming home: the people of Israel had fled from Egypt, wandered in the desert, and finally crossed the Jordan river. They were home; and at once – before any account of their defeating the Canaanites or distributing the land among themselves – at once, we find them eating the food of home: no more manna, but the ordinary food of a settled people.

Our Gospel parable, which we know so well, tells us of a young man who'd wandered in a wilderness of his own making, but finally took the long journey home. No more yearning after pig-swill, with a rumbling stomach, but a feast of all the best which home had to offer.

These two stories, taken together, could be said to sum up what Lent's about: finding ourselves in the wilderness, along with Jesus, but after trial and testing – and in our case, coming to a sharper awareness of our own weakness, we're welcomed home. Indeed, this isn't just the pattern of Lent, but of every week; each week we come home to our Father's house and to our Christian brothers and sisters, bringing with us with an awareness of the trials and tests we've met with, and

the times we've failed in faithfulness. And each time we're welcomed to a feast at the table of the Lord, the very bread of heaven, the food of home.

But, of course, this isn't all that the parable of the prodigal son is about; it's about the young man who wandered, to be sure, but it's also about the Father who waited and welcomed, and the older brother who laboured dutifully away, but let resentment fester.

We almost know it too well, but perhaps a fresh approach might make it more our own. Come with me, if you will, on a journey with each of these characters – a journey in your own imagination. This is a kind of meditative prayer, and really one needs longer than we can take in the space of this sermon to get into this meditation – to discover where you are in the story, who you identify with and why, and through this, to enter into dialogue with God about your own life, your own experience, feelings, hopes and fears. So, come with me on 3 very short journeys by way of 'tasters'. You may time during the coming week to enter into this meditation more deeply, by re-visiting the story before God in your prayers. And that might not just be a matter of sitting down with the in front of you: it could be a meditative reflection and prayer you carry out while you're gardening, or walking, or doing any other repetitive thing which would allow you to let your imagination go on a journey.

But now, just for a taster, travel with the young man: feel the his impatience and boredom with the constrictions of home the small world he's grown up in – the lure, the excitement of the big city and foreign travel. Imagine, if you can, what might have compelled him to treat his father so badly, to demand his inheritance as though he wished the old man already dead; may be you have lodged in your *own* memory some time when your impatience, your boredom, your impetuosity, led you to trample over proper canons of behaviour, and other people's feelings...Can you taste that experience again?

And then the thrill of having money in your pocket for the first time – *real* money; the chance to do whatever you like. Did it feel as though the world was his oyster? What would *you* like to splash out on if you suddenly had such an experience of new-wound wealth? Travel with that young man as he makes some unfortunate choices – but don't just observe him from the outside. Are there any links between his behaviour and who you are,...or have been... or might be, given half the chance?

And then comes the time when the guilt comes off the gingerbread; indeed, the ginger bread itself disappears. The young man reaches rock bottom. How does it feel? Huge anxiety...terror of the consequences...absolute desperation...painful regret.....*maybe* genuine guilt for the wrong courses he's taken? Have you ever been

there, or can you imagine how it might feel?...What feeling is strong enough to take the young man on that long trek home, with a prepared speech in which he'll eat a large dose of humble –pie? From the inside, does this feel like true contrition, or something a bit more manipulative? What's the worst thing he thinks might happen to him – and what's the best, after he's climbed the hill to his old front door?

Well, you can continue that meditation on the young man's experience right into his father's arms, the emotional welcome, and the extraordinary party; if you do, it will tell you something very profound about God's love for you, and just how overwhelming it is; and you can also continue it into the question, what do you think he was likely to have done the next day? How did conversations go with his father after all this has happened? Did he settle at home?

But let's move quickly to the old man in the story: why do you imagine he let his younger son have all that cash, emotionally kick him in the teeth, and then walk away? How must it have felt? And what did he think would happen to the boy – would he ever see him again, or at least hear news of him? If you're a parent or a grandparent, consult your own experience of letting young people go, to feed your imagination...

And then the waiting – the waiting every day, it seems, and being on the look-out, straining his eyes down the

road in the direction the young man had disappeared in. What did the waiting mean to the old man? Maybe he only discovered the strength of his own emotions in the moment when 'from a long way off' he spied his son. Has that ever been the case for you? Can you imagine or remember the welling-up of an emotion which completely overrides your sense of embarrassment: this old man must have gathered up his robe to run down the street to his son; the neighbours would have gasped or sniggered to see him baring his legs and behaving so below his proper dignity as a householder and a father. But what did he care?...

Can you visit a love like that in your own imagination – a love which sees his erring child gaunt and wan, and shows no inclination to say, '*I could have told you so?*' This parent just wants his children home and safe....We're touching the reality of God's love, when our imaginations bring such a picture of welcome right into our hearts. Meditating on this could take you a long way into prayer about God, yourself, and other people in need of love and welcome.

But let's move on swiftly again to the older son; let's plod with him up and down the fields, doing his daily round of toil. What goes on in *his* mind all those months or years that his brother is away? Is he angry with his brother for showing such contempt for their father? Is there a history of mutual irritation and disapproval between the two boys? Is the older

brother jealous? Is he tired and weary, stuck in a rut? Is he secretly imagining in vivid detail what his sibling is likely to be getting up to? After all, when the young man comes home, the elder brother's very certain and quick with his accusation about how all that money's been spent. What's going on there?

Yes, accompany the brother back from the fields to the house, and hear the sounds of the party; maybe you feel sorry for him, or can identify with his rage and resentment. Perhaps you, too, know what it's like to feel tired and taken for granted, and more than a bit fed up.

In that state of mind, can the father's entreaties get through to you? Can you hear how much the father's loves *r* you, too...how he wants *both* his children home, safe in the bosom of the family, enjoying the feast? What would make it possible for you to accept that, to allow such love entrance into your heart – both a love for yourself, and a love for the other one, the so obviously unworthy one? In what kind of way will you be able to speak to the brother, with whom you're asked to share once again around the table? How might the father help you here?... Imagine yourself into these questions: another opportunity for deeper reflection about God, yourself, and others, leading into prayer, as you let this story touch your heart.

It's a story about coming home; a story about
overwhelming love which welcomes; and a story about
feasting, and sharing the food of home together.