

Luke 15:11-24 – The Return of the Prodigal Son pt 1: The Younger Son

Wonder what stirs your emotions? Is it music? Is it sport? Is it fine cooking? Maybe it's all of those, and more. I am a visual person. Images move me. It's one of the reasons I've used a lot of slides and pictures in my talks: I engage with them, they help me see things and express things I might not otherwise be able to say as well with words. Some of you will know that I studied art history. And when I was at work I specialised in testing and evaluating advertising. I've always been fascinated by the use of images and pictures as a means of communication.

And actually one of the wonderful things about our faith is that through the generations the church has often held the same view. Look around most churches: they are full of images. Sometimes there's a bit too much bling ([SLIDE](#)). But even here, with our elegant whitewashed walls, we have 7 stained glass windows, and recently we've enjoyed Brian's lovely artwork and Sheila's altarcloth and many of you enjoyed our impromptu art exhibition at the summer fair.

Why I am telling you this? (Post-holiday stream of consciousness.) Actually there is a reason: mini-series on the Prodigal Son. Come at it from a slightly different angle. Famous story, many of you will have heard it many times before. What's all this got to do with the story of the Prodigal Son?

Base the series around a painting: famous work by Dutch master Rembrandt 'The Return of the Prodigal Son' ([SLIDE](#)). Painted near his death after a tumultuous life – story of coming home, and Rembrandt captures beautifully each of the main characters: Father (looking down in compassion), younger son (in humility) and older son in shadows (in judgement and disapproval).

Great work and just looking at it reveals so much of the story. Also had a profound effect on a theologian and writer called Henri Nouwen. So much so that it shaped his spiritual journey for several years and he ended up writing a book of the same name, published in 1994. I can't recommend this book highly enough: it's not really an art book but one about the spiritual life, about how God meets us at the point of our deepest needs. Here's how Nouwen describes his first encounter with the painting shortly after returning from an exhausting preaching tour: [READ p4-5](#).

And so begins his journey, which he summarises in his Prologue as follows: [READ PARA p23](#) finishing 'I am the younger son; I am the elder son; and I am on my way to becoming the Father.'

When I first read this book, this understanding of the parable hit me right between the eyes and took me on a profound spiritual journey which helped me to grow hugely in faith and understand the gospel at a deeper level. As a result I have taken the same journey that Henri Nouwen has undertaken: I have come to see what it means for me to be the younger son, and the elder son, and finally how God calls us to share that compassion with others – on other words to become like the Father. It's probably fair to say that most sermons on this topic focus primarily on the younger son – rightly so, in many ways – and that is where we shall begin today. But there are 3 characters in this tale and all of them deserve a sermon to themselves, which is what they will get! ([JR next week, so read 1 online](#)) My hope and prayer is that you too will undertake the same journey, and grow in time to see yourself as the younger son, the elder son, and who knows even the Father in this parable.

Younger son – story well known: Father had 2 sons – younger ‘dad I wish you were dead’ (inheritance after death) – gets inheritance – squanders it (George Best quote) – hits rock bottom when cleaning out pigs and craving food of pigs (unclean) – comes to senses, returns home and welcomed by his loving Father. Not rejected but celebrated.

Story told to challenge Pharisees – back to v1-2 – Jesus mixing with undesirables – and Pharisees mutter to themselves – why is he mixing with those type of people – holy people don’t do that! Point Jesus is making is that God is not a tyrant or a spiritual snob but a loving Father, and he wants to see all his children come home. The lost ones, the prodigals, matter just as much to God. He doesn’t want to reject them but to welcome them home.

Who are the prodigals today? Easy to think of examples. The wild livers, the drug dealers, the hellraisers who come back to God. All heard the stories – grew up with famous biographies. Run Baby Run (Nicky Cruz – EXPAND), Chasing the dragon (EXPAND). Met a few myself – used to go prison visiting – e.g. Fred (EXPAND).

What’s it got to do with us today? Maybe some of you were like that. For many – ‘that’s not me’. (Heard story many times – one for other people.) Well, maybe – or maybe this is in fact a story for all of us. Henri Nouwen was a theologian who then went to live with a community looking after disabled people. Pillar of community, intelligent, well-behaved and respectable. But his insight into this story was that he came to realise that at some point we all have to understand that we are the younger son. The son is lost because he ends up living far away from the Father. That’s his ‘lostness’. And we too can all live far from God, and frankly we often do. There are periods of our lives when we wear masks at church and with other people, but the truth is that there is a lostness, a homelessness in all of us, and part of our journey with God is to recognise that, to see ourselves as we really are, and to come home.

Describes this journey in 2 parts: leaving home, and then coming home

Leaving home – shock of wishing Father dead, abandoning true home. Physical act, but a spiritual act too which most of us experience repeatedly. Here’s how Nouwen describes it: [READ excerpts p37-39](#).

So we live our lives listening to other voices instead, being dragged away from our home with God by other influences. But what are they? What are the influences that drag us away? Here’s Nouwen again: READ p40 ‘But there... something’ then p41 ‘when I forget...easily’ and ‘Constantly falling’ to end of para.

This is our lostness – to be driven by all the other voices which lead us away from the peace of God, our true home. We can be perfectly respectable and yet utterly lost. (PAUSE to reflect)

What’s solution? Simply this – to come home. Passage ‘Coming to senses’: realise that you are the younger son after all, and have left the security of Father’s embrace. Big step in itself. Big part of my spiritual journey – I always identified with elder son (more next week) – well behaved, on the farm, resentful of the wild children who sowed their wild oats and then came back.

But actually I realised I was as much the younger son: may not have led a debauched lifestyle, but often I was in a distant country, far from a true home. Maybe that's you too. Maybe you're driven by those voices. Maybe it's a long time since you really felt at home with God. Maybe never really felt it. Time to come home.

That's next part – actually do it. To come back to God, just as you are. Leaving all your pride, your defence mechanisms, your trinkets and baubles behind. Humbling. Hard to admit you need God as much as the delinquent drug dealer down the road. Or as Nouwen puts it: READ Nouwen para p53 'One of the greatest challenges...'

But there is one great truth in all this: you are the child, the heir. All the other distant places don't offer a true inheritance. Your true home is with God, and whatever has happened, you are still the Father's son or daughter. So you *can* arise, you *can* return. You don't have to be a hired hand. The Father is still waiting to embrace you and welcome you home – still his son, still his daughter.

Look at the younger son in the painting: how he receives the Father's embrace. That is what God longs to give each of you, if only you will claim your true sonship, your true daughtership, if only you will admit your lostness and return to him, the waiting Father.

Story of Prodigal Son presents us with 3 stages of the spiritual life, and I believe most of us have to walk them all to truly become the person that Jesus calls us to be. The first we have looked at today: to learn from the younger son. After all, was not Jesus himself the true Prodigal, who left his Father's home to come to this earth. He knows what it is like to be this son. Not with the wild living, maybe, but to have to leave his Father before returning. If he can make that journey, so can we. The story of the younger son is the story of us all, at least all of us who truly desire a real relationship with God as Father. God is calling you home. Will you arise? Will you return?

REFLECT ON PAINTING – IF WISH TO, IMAGINE YOURSELF AS YOUNGER SON, COMING HOME. AND SAY WHAT YOU NEED TO GOD.