

LUKE 15:11-32
COMING HOME

A young offender who has spent time in prison, who never even thinks about God.
A teenager who goes to church sometimes but doesn't believe in God enough for it to make an impact on her life.
A youth leader in church who is married but his marriage is under strain and he has fallen for someone else.
A 24-year old man who says he will turn to God when he starts a family.
An 11-year old girl who thinks that God is for old people.
A middle-aged New Age worshipper who thinks that the devil is just as interesting as Jesus.
A pensioner who has been a Sunday School teacher, a member of the church missions committee, an active elder, but is now complaining that God lets her suffer too much.
A 40-year old who thinks that all religions lead to God.
A wealthy businessman who has everything he could ever want or need and thinks that God is irrelevant.
Someone who has attended church for 30 years but has never quite managed to grasp what faith is all about.
One of the people who wrote part of the Bible.

Who would you describe as 'lost'? If I were to ask you to put these people in a list in order of 'lostness', who is the most lost? Is there anyone who does not belong on that list at all? Let me suggest to you that all of these people might be 'lost' at times, people stuck in blind alleys, weighed down by the pressures of life, as well as those who have no faith and are helpless; people who make wrong choices and get stuck with the consequences; they all need to be rescued by the grace and love of Jesus. One son on his knees; one son on his high horse, right but...; the father has grace and love enough for both of them.

There were mutterings! The mutterings were aimed at Jesus. He was keeping the wrong company, the "tax collectors and sinners", who came to hear Him preach; and not for the first time has He been in their company and was drawing criticism. "*The Pharisees...*" (Luke 15:2) He is keeping the wrong company, as far as His critics are concerned. He is the "Friend of sinners". That was their accusation and what for the Pharisees was an accusation, for Jesus was a compliment! He had come to be the friend of sinners; He had come to seek and save people who were 'lost'; this was the whole reason for Him being here and these three 'lost' parables are His way of explaining to people that reason; "this is what God is like; this is what God has done; this is why I am here!"

Who is lost in the parable of the prodigal? We tend to focus on the younger brother, and we are right to do that because that's where the parable focusses to start with. His quest for freedom and independence is seen in his request: "*Father...*" (Luke 15:12) He wants to see the world, he wants to find life, he wants to have fun, to experience things, and he can only do that with money in his pocket and friends to share these experiences with. Wine, women, parties – then the money is gone and the experiences are empty; the fun is a distant memory and Jesus has him at his lowest point, a good Jewish boy looking after pigs, unclean animals of unclean animals. This is what it means to be 'lost', alone, hopeless, rock-bottom; not knowing where to turn to next! On his knees, he turns to come home! What will he find when he gets there?

But there's another brother in this story. He's still at home; he hasn't left but has been hard-working, looking after the farm with his dad, and perhaps he has built up deep resentment over his little brother, gone away with half the farm in his pocket! Then he's come home and dad's welcomed him and now he wants to throw a party – it is all too much! "*the older...*" (Luke 15:28ff) It comes pouring out, all the years of hurt and pain and resentment towards his brother and his father and how he feels and it is not pretty; it is full of anger, and there's lots of finger-

pointing! He still lives with his dad, but there is a huge gulf between father and son here; there are barriers in this relationship that have built up over the years and something needs to happen. The older son doesn't seem lost on the outside, a partner with his dad in the family business, but inside, deep down, beneath the surface, there is so much hurt, so much alienation between father and son, something has to give.

One son on his knees; one son on his high horse, right but...; the father has grace and love enough for both of them. The tax collectors and sinners were lost because God was irrelevant to them; their lifestyle that was all about them and their fun, but also all about their mistakes and how life had got messy for them. But the Pharisees were also lost because a gulf had grown between them and God: they looked OK on the outside because they were so religious and kept the rules, but inside there was a gulf between them and God. The love had gone out, it was all religion and no faith; it was all religion and no love for God or for other people. They didn't see themselves as lost, but did they see themselves in the big brother? Anyone with eyes to see should have done! They are on their high horse and Jesus is spending time with the wrong people, but the Pharisees needed grace just as much as these others! We see people who have no interest in God, the gospel, and church and we consider them to be 'lost' and in need of saving, but we can be just as lost as far as God is concerned, in a blind alley, struggling with faith, the light has gone out, the love has dried up!

The father has grace enough for both. To the prodigal, the father throws his arms wide open and welcomes him home. It is not enough just to welcome him home, but "*the father...*" (Luke 15:22) The robe, a ring, the sandals, a feast – all these are signs that the son is home. These are gifts of distinction for someone important and all the talk of being a servant comes to nothing. The son is full of repentance and the father is full of grace; he has come home and he is graced, forgiven, blessed by his father. But when the older brother complains and pours out his anguish to dad, dad says something fascinating: "*my son...*" (Luke 15:31) "Everything I have is yours" – the lostness of this son was in not seeing what he had. He had been blinded by his anger and resentment so that he didn't see! He didn't see that he had so much by way of privilege and wealth and blessing, but his mind was full of anger and resentment. There was a home-coming for both sons as they were met with the father's grace and love. One son on his knees; one son on his high horse, right but...; the father has grace and love enough for both of them.

"In the last analysis (repentance) is not merely disgust (with ourselves); it is above all homesickness; it is not just turning away from something, but turning back home...there is a homecoming for us all because there is a home." (Thielicke *The Waiting Father* p26,29) What does home mean to you? The place where you are safe? Home is where you are loved and accepted as you are? Home is the people who care for you? I know for some home is a place of conflict and violence, so this is not universally true! But the gospel is about home-coming for us in the best sense of home. In our different ways and from different starting points, we are coming home to someone who has loved us before we loved Him, to God who has graced us long before we even considered Him. We are made for relationship with God; it is part of being human; it is in our spiritual DNA to be God's friends. Repentance is when we discover that we are lost and begin to turn to come home!

Reconciliation is a gospel theme. "*All this...*" (2 Corinthians 5:18f) There are two threads here: the first is what God has done, reconciling us to Himself through Jesus; forgiving our sins because Jesus has been the sin-bearer on the cross. Our friendship with God was broken when we wandered away, a relationship broken by our sin but now the gospel tells us that God has repaired that relationship; that God has done this, not our choice but His; reconciliation is done when Jesus died on the cross and we are welcomed back into His family, we are welcomed home. In the second thread we tell others the gospel so that they can be reconciled to God as well; we have a job to do in telling people about this great reconciliation; God has committed to us the message of reconciliation! In a world where so many people feel

alienated, from family, from friends, from the nation, from God, from the people who employ them – into this world a message of reconciliation and home-coming surely is a powerful message.

How much do we recognise ourselves in this story? One son on his knees; one son on his high horse... both lost; both in need of grace; both loved and graced by their father. There is a recognition for all of us here, that in some ways and at some times we have all been lost; maybe you'd say you still are lost! Come home: there is a home for us, in knowing Jesus and in knowing the Father's love for us; this is the place where we are loved totally, unconditionally, without limits; there is a reconciliation with God that we all need to have, knowing that God has loved us as we are, seeing that Jesus has died for us, knowing that everything God has is ours! *"I heard the voice of Jesus say 'Come unto me and rest... I came to Jesus as I was; so weary, worn and sad; I found in Him a resting-place and He has made me glad"*. We will sing these words in a minute – will they give voice to something deep in your heart? That Jesus is your resting-place, that your sense of your heart and mind being at home is with Him? Or are you feeling lost? Then turn to Jesus and find in Him your home-coming, reconciled with God because God has loved us.