

**2016-03-06 Sue Diggory**

**Lent 4**

**Luke 15: 11 – 32 & 2 Corinthians 5: 16 - end**

Today's reading is about a family, it's about 2 sons and their father, it's about sibling rivalry and family fragmentation, in many ways it's a very modern 21<sup>st</sup> century story.

*'The younger Son said to his father "Father give me my share of the estate."*

This was an outrageous thing for any son to say to his father! And the most hurtful thing any father could hear; in reality the son was saying 'I want my inheritance now, I want you to act as if you were already dead.

He sets out and embarks on a fun filled party life style – it's great all the time the money is flowing; but then the money runs out, the friends run out and life sinks to an all time low. He ends up looking after pigs; not a good job for a Jewish boy to have!

What changed his mind, we're only told *he came to his senses* and turned towards home rehearsing what to his father, and I suspect exactly how to say it. *I will set out and go back to my father and say to him ...* I wonder how long it took him to finalise the script? And how confident of his father's reaction, that is until he saw his father running down the road towards him, until he experienced that kiss of reconciliation.

This wasn't the usual way for a first century dignified Jewish father to react, here was an unusual reaction, even for a loving father!

We know how the story continues; a party follows, the father had to celebrate as he restored his son to his full place within the family with *the best robe, a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet*' all signs of authority and son-ship – sons wore sandals whereas servants went barefoot! Full restoration for the son who was lost, once again he was a much loved and valued member of the family.

But of course we also know that the older son wouldn't join the party, he wouldn't even go in. He wouldn't even acknowledge his brother; he could only refer to him as *this son of yours*. He was so bitter and full of resentment that he couldn't feel the joy his father felt when his younger brother returned home. He didn't even realise that he too had 'left home' that he too had turned his back on his father's love; merely going through the motions of family life, not a really part of the family. *Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders* – hardly the language of a son who has a loving relationship with his father!

How did the father react? In the same way that he reacted to seeing his younger son *his father went out*, he went out to him, again dignity was put aside and compassionate love was allowed to take over!

The father treated both his sons with equal love and compassion. He had no favourites. Both were equally loved, both were equally precious to their father. He loved each of them so much that they were both free to leave home – one by physically going to a *distant land* and the other by allowing his slavish obedience to rules rather than a heartfelt response to family love to separate him from his father even though he outwardly appeared to be a model son. This is the same freedom God gives to us, to leave or to stay, to be in a growing relationship with him, or to remain at a distance.

Today our challenge is to see where we reflect the two sons in our lives – are we like the younger son spending too much time in the '*distant land*' living in a way that stops us growing in our relationship with God, or perhaps like the older son are we so busy working for him that this too is stunting our spiritual growth, and then seek to change and like the younger son be prepared to throw ourselves at the father's feet in total submission.

I know for me this is quite a challenge but one that I need to continually work at, but in the knowledge that God cannot love me more than he already does and that he has no favourites; which of course brings us another challenge as we seek to reach out in mission knowing that all are equally loved whether or not they are yet able to call God their Father.