

Prayer: Merciful God, it is often our way to separate ourselves from those we love, so it is your way to draw us back together and to you, wrapping us in your loving arms. Keep reminding us of this, we ask <sup>off</sup>.

Amen

The challenge set before us today is to reflect on how these bible passages speak about 'Returning to God'. Where I mentally wandered was to wonder about '**who**' the God is, that we're returning to, *in today's bible texts?* And then wonder what the 'returning' might be about. **And don't forget** we're in the Church season of Lent, the season of walking towards Easter – Good Friday to Easter Sunday.

**Traditionally** one of the major themes in church language for this season is 'repentance / forgiveness' a returning to God saying: '**I messed-up / I am sorry**'. The classic words we heard from the Son who left home, in Jesus parable. <sup>on</sup> I'm happy to admit over the years I've joined the classic Christian traditions of reflecting on these themes with this parable from Jesus... but to only let this parable speak to us about our repentance / our return to God is a bit like having a car with only one headlight working. We only see **half** – a part of what it is saying to us, our vision is **incomplete**. <sup>off</sup>

So today for us – <sup>on</sup> I want to concentrate more on what our texts are saying about the God who doesn't wait for us to say "sorry", who just acts; who provides food for us, (literally and figuratively); who allows us to make 'grown-up decisions (*we think*); who calls out to us, runs to meet us, wraps loving arms around our tired, travel stained bodies, throws a feast / party / celebration for us; **and stands** in the cold, the 'outside' with us... <sup>off</sup>

You see, in this season of Lent we are called by the traditions of our faith to focus on **returning to God** because we sin, we mess up, **we make mistakes**... we turn away from God and God's ways. One of the biggest helps I have to define what 'sin' might be is to remember it is spelt 'sIn' – so if there's an 'I' at the front of what 'I' am doing – 'I' need to check immediately against God's teachings / Jesus teachings about how to live, how to be, what 'I' am doing and if it is in alignment / in harmony with **all** that kind of stuff. And in both our texts today there is a fair bit of the "I" around, **but**– if we stop long enough to look, it is also balanced with what 'God / Jesus' do. cV

What do I mean? Well in the Joshua reading, although we only had 4 verses, they were about an incredibly important transition in Israelite's history. <sup>on</sup> **We all know** something about how they escaped from Egypt, (Join us on Friday Nights with the Youth to learn more about this bit), but after escaping they had 40 years of wandering – getting lost – literally (probably) and figuratively in the Sinai desert.

Well, "*getting the lost bit*" is what God is saying in Joshua, because there are lots of stories about how in their time in the desert, they grumbled; murmured; questioned God's promises; failed to trust; wandered away in faith from God and returned. But basically most of us remember the stories about their grumbings against all that God did for them, how rebellious (disgraceful, (lacking in grace)) **sinful** they were.

**But who was their God?** <sup>off</sup> Today their God declares forgiveness and a fresh beginning; a God who 'rolled away' the disgrace of; 'Egypt'; of the 'leaving' people's grumbings; rebellions; and turning away from the faith. This is the gift of a new start, a 'new' people, a new land, new covenant in **faith** with God.

So, we have the last of the 'God' special food 'Manna' and the **start** of their own providing because they had arrived! **Side thought?** We often think that to 'arrive' is to have everything provided for us – but at this faith point – to 'arrive' meant to start to do it for ourselves, not be dependent, to start the growing-up process! *Anyway*, today they keep the Passover; the manna stops and they **have a feast** of thanksgiving, a celebration for they have arrived 'home'. "Home" both literally (the land) and in faith (God's new start).

**Returning 'home'** is what in the parable of the lost son, Jesus says: **is God**, for us. Returning to God, is coming home – from wherever we have wandered, run, walked determinedly, 'nibbled our way – away...

however we managed – and ‘us’ humans are really, really good at this, no matter how we manage to get ‘lost’; when we return to God, **we are returning home**.

If Jesus had stopped at this point, or contained his parable to this point alone, his life would have been much easier. The ‘murmuring’ Pharisees (yes we are supposed to hear echo’s from their past (Egypt)) they don’t like what Jesus is doing, **mixing** with the wrong ‘sort’ of people. **Well**, Jesus wasn’t just ‘mixing’, he was **eating, feasting, celebrating** with them, as if they were important, they mattered! And **if** ‘mixing’ with them – then he was **‘being’ with them**, talking, teaching about **‘who’ / what God is**. **And if** Jesus **had** contained his teaching to just being about returning to God – in repentance, and asking for forgiveness – like the ‘lost’ son”, they would never have disagreed / grumbled....

So what is their problem??? <sup>1\*</sup> Loader says “The problem was that **Jesus put the loving first**, rather than keeping it till after repentance. People matter most. It was in that sense unconditional love, *but this should not be seen as love which does not care about how people are and what they are doing to themselves.*” It is **a love** that stands beside, stand with and even in this parable the love ‘standing beside’ **never** means agreement with / approval for behaviour... -> <sup>on</sup> **But** this parable **does say** Jesus’ God, his Father, is willing to face any amount of cultural / social embarrassment to run towards our returning figure to grab us in a tight welcome ‘home’ hug, that is **so good to** feel, know, have happen to the **‘all’** of our being. Cv

There is an extra gift in this ‘home’ embrace, in Jesus parable which we might easily miss. In this embrace, there is the offer of the father’s protection. <sup>off</sup> In Jesus culture, this young man lost everything to **gentiles**, (anyone not Jewish so <sup>2\*</sup> Romans, pagan-pig owners, complete strangers to his God). To Jesus listeners (Pharisees etc included!) this just unbelievable. They would know what the Talmud said had to be done to him. <sup>2\*</sup> The (qetsatsah) ceremony was supposed to work like this: “If he ever shows up in his village again, then the villagers can fill a large earthenware jug with burned nuts and corn, break it in front of the prodigal, and shout his name out loud, pronouncing him cut off from his people. After that, he will be a cosmic orphan, who might as well go back and live with the pigs.” CV

So the only hope was for him to reach his father – **before** the village reached him! <sup>on</sup> What he discovered was that his father was looking out for him (**so wrong** culturally and socially!), and **ran** for him (another social embarrassment), reaching him well before anyone else. This parable has the father continually breaking social rules, looking for ‘dead’ sons, running, giving away more inheritance with the ‘best’ robe, (inheritance expectation of the eldest son),... the Father **just doesn’t stop** putting people first! <sup>off</sup>

**THEN** this ‘God’ of ours, having wrapped us securely ‘home’, **then Jesus says** God will listen to our rambling excuses and attempts to make things right... But in this parable – if you hadn’t noticed or thought about it until today, but in this parable there are 2 lost sons. One is the very dramatic younger one’s story, “off”, his older brother moans, ‘off spending the family inheritance with prostitutes/ gentiles’, and then he is as just as dramatically welcomed home....

But there is more than one way to get ‘lost’, <sup>on</sup> the older son is *almost* as lost from full life, as his younger brother was. He is wrapped up in his own version of life, grumbling, (Oh, Jesus was clever at making us remember our faith history of getting ‘lost’), he so wrapped up that he ‘won’t join in the celebration. He won’t go inside, won’t go home. He is outside looking into the lit up house – full of people catching up, eating, celebrating.... He’s in the dark, cold, alone, hurting, angry..... <sup>off</sup>

**We might** want to have the kind of “chat” to point out how **wrong** his version / life take / view is and what he should do about it... but actually standing out there is his reality. And Jesus parable says it’s not our job to have the chat!

Jesus leaves us with a most amazing picture. He finishes his parable with God – the Father – right out there, beside, standing with – yes, **the Father is having that ‘chat’** about coming in – with all the reasons why. <sup>on</sup> But at the end of the parable Jesus leaves us with Father protecting this son with his presence just as much as he protected his youngest, Father and Son - together. Returning home to God might not be quite how we expect! <sup>off</sup> Amen.