

Do you want back with God?

Luke 15:11-32

Your son walks into the room you're in, gets your attention, and then announces: 'I wish you were dead...' How do you react to *that*? No doubt you're emotional. Love, pain, anger; a barrier hardening between you both. What would *you* do?

Your son goes on to demand that you sell up what you own, and give him his share of the inheritance now. You're losing your son; you can see that. And if you do this thing he is asking, you're losing what's rightfully yours too, putting it in his hands to sell off or give away to some stranger. What would *you* do?

Jesus story in Luke 15:11-32 paints a moving picture of how things really are between us and God. Jesus taught us to see our relationship with God like this: that we human beings are children, and God's the Father. And the children have wished their dad was dead.

That is what the younger son is really saying in v.12. To say, 'Give me my inheritance now' is to say 'the only thing about you that I care about is what I'm entitled to from you, and I don't want to wait for it any longer. I'd rather you were dead so I can get it now. I don't give a stuff about being with you.'

In fact, the younger son takes what the father astonishingly agrees to give him at great personal cost, and sets off for a 'distant country' (v.13). He puts as much distance between himself and the father as he can. His dad's not a reference in his life at all. Out of sight, out of mind.

We human beings have told ourselves that there is no God. Or we have admitted that He might be there, or even that He really *is* - but we would much prefer that He wasn't. We'd rather live our lives without thinking of Him at all, far less being *with* Him. God to us is out of sight and out of mind. And that works for us, as long as we've sucked up all the good things we think we're entitled to from Him - life, work, family, health and home comforts - before we bin Him.

Jesus' story reminds us of the Father that we would rather forget. The pain for Him of letting a child go this way; the graciousness and patience He has in letting us go far off and wishing Him away. A few weeks ago we read in the first part of this chapter how much God loves and treasures and values us. He longs for us to be home with Him. But when people choose to keep away - as, it must be admitted, *most* people do - He lets us do it.

And when we live with our backs turned and our minds emptied of the God who gave us life, when we head into lands distant from Him - we *spend ourselves*. In vv.13-14, the younger son takes all he's been given and blows it all on booze, parties and women.

People still do that. And they spend themselves completely on other things. Becoming the best at work. Creating the 'perfect' family. Making the house a dream home. Some of us spend ourselves on grief and bitterness. Others on being noticed. Or seeking approval. We throw ourselves into something, each one of us. And we throw all of what we've taken from God into it, too.

When God is dead to you, and you've put distance between you and Him, what do you spend yourself on?

Isn't it always when people are in trouble that they end up crying out to God? It seems that it's only when things are falling apart completely that His existence matters to us and we entertain the idea of speaking to Him. In vv. 14-17, we read that the younger son 'began to be in need' and ultimately, that results in him deciding to go back to dad.

People are still coming to God off the back of things falling apart. And that's okay. Judging by the later part of this story, God doesn't seem to mind that it takes a crisis before we decide to come home to Him; so long as we do come home to Him! And it's so good that God receives us like this, because we're falling apart all over the place. We come to Him pretty tattered and fragile.

Our marriages breaking down. Our mental health fracturing. Things from the past that have never been dealt with shaking our present. Our jobs becoming crazy stressful with multiplying impossible responsibilities. Job security feeling ever more frayed. Our debts increasing. Our health decreasing. The sheer stress of life for more and more of us; it feels like we're blowing up and up, wondering *when* rather than *if* we're going to explode and collapse. We have *more* than begun to be in need...

But 'coming home to dad' is not the younger son's first reaction. Look at those verses, from v.14 - he spends himself completely, then hard times hit, and '...he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to the fields to feed pigs.'

Jesus is telling this story to Jewish people, for whom pigs are unclean animals. This lad feeding pigs would have made His listeners think, 'the

guy's hit rock bottom.' This lad *trying - and failing - to even eat with the pigs* in v.16 would have made them think, 'he's sunk even lower than that.' But this is what happens, isn't it? Things fall apart completely. And our first reaction is to try and fix it ourselves, only to find things getting much, much worse.

Instant high interest loans, with totally unmanageable debt to follow... Trying to patch up a marriage with increasingly bitter conversations with one another... trying to fix our mental ill health by googling self-help techniques or making ourselves feel better with shopping or eating or 'time out just for me...'

Sacrificing everything else to keep the head above the water in a job whose circumstances you were never the master of... ignoring the signs that the stress of our times has got a hold of you, and you're about to blow - telling yourself that you just need to try harder, get on with it, pull your socks up...

And all of this, we keep doing with our backs turned to God and without giving Him a thought! All of this, we try to muster in our own strength! When will we realise, we don't have strength enough?!?! Must we wait until we're beneath rock bottom to cry out to God?!?! And yet we do. And He's really patient about that. He's still there... ready to give you the home, the safety and the peace that you needed all along.

A good Dad is always there at the end of the phone, ready to listen and help when their child calls. And God is the best of Dads. Look at what the younger son does though, in vv.17-20. You see, this is more than that phone call that parents only get when the kid's in trouble, and that's the only time they hear from them: 'Mum, Dad, can I get some money?' 'Dad, I've crashed the car...' 'Mum, how do I cook this?' 'Mum... Dad... they've left me.'

So, so many people think they've got some kind of relationship with God because they cry out to Him for a bail out when the going gets tough; only to wish Him dead again and put Him out sight and out of mind when everything's alright. But that's *not* what this child in vv.17-20 does...

'I will *set out* and *go back* to my Father...' This is more than a 'God, can you just help me with this one thing?...' This is a decision to *return home to God*. This is the younger son realising that he misses home. He *values being with the Father*. He sees that it's infinitely better. He realises that he deserves far less than he's already been given, but he hopes to God that his Dad will have

him back home again. He sets a new course in life. To come back home to Dad, not with demands or expectations, but with total humility.

A few weeks back, we saw in the two short parables before this one that *God the Father wants you back home with Him*, very much indeed. But the new question that this parable raises is the one I'm going to ask you now:

Do you want to be home with God the Father? Have you told Him that?

Heather and I were at a wedding a couple of weeks ago, where the celebrant (for it was a humanist wedding) told us at the start of the service that it was to be a very relaxed service, and although the couple themselves weren't known for their PDAs, during the service our own PDAs were very welcome.

Quickly, I tried to work out what he was talking about. At first, I wondered why he was giving us permission to pull out Personal Digital Assistants, the pre-smartphone tech of 15 years ago. Did he want us to email some documents to each other whilst the vows were exchanged? I was briefly encouraged at the thought that the couple, not being known for their PDAs, wouldn't be emailing their 'I dos' to each other.

Then I clicked: He was talking about 'Public Displays of Affection.' And as the wedding celebrant observed; some of us are that sort of people, and others of us aren't. What Jesus teaches us in vv.20-24 is that our Father God is very much this sort of person. Like it or not, God lavishes public displays of affection on the children who come home to Him.

Before the younger son could say a word in v.21, his Father had already disgraced himself in front of everyone. He really had. This was more than Dad-dancing; and more than Dad shouting 'love you!' outside the school gates. In that culture, for an older man like this father to be seen running would have been an embarrassing disgrace. Not to mention throwing his arms around his son and kissing him. And all this he does 'whilst his son was still a long way off' - whilst there was still some distance between them.

But the Father doesn't care a bit about what other people think or say about this - He is just delighted to have His child home. Here's Jesus in v.20, the very Son of God Himself, telling you how God sees you - He is 'filled with compassion' at the sight of you! He sees the brokenness and mess, the sin, the guilt, the fear, the 'how did I end up like this?' and the incredible burden of stress you feel along with the rest of this society - and He wants to run and embrace you until you feel safe again.

I'm afraid that, however you feel about public displays of affection, God's the King of them, and He doesn't hold back from making a public fuss over your homecoming to Him. There is feasting and celebration and dressing you up and making you feel like a prince or princess. This is home, this is God's welcome to you.

And it doesn't stop work being impossibly demanding, or the debts being real, or the mental fragility needing nurtured, or the relationships being tough and requiring a lot of work. But it does totally overshadow those things. Your identity, hope, safety, security and destiny are all bound up in that embrace that God the Father gives you as you come home to Him. Everything else is still there, but it's all second place now. It is going to be okay, now you're home.

There's nobody who comes close to demonstrating a public display of affection the way that God did at the cross. This was public like nothing else. Jesus, Son of God, was hung out to die on a cross with crowds walking by, noticing or not noticing, some crowding to cry and others to laugh. He was there for all to see; if it was happening today the world would be watching on social media live streaming.

It was a display like nothing else, in a quite physical sense. I don't know how many other people you know who love you so much that they would be stripped, tortured and hung naked, completely exposed to the whole world in a brutal way. Jesus isn't just someone who says He would; He's someone who *did it*. For the love of you.

And this was affection like nothing else. Imagine how much Jesus loves you. That He would willingly do all that, so that the way for you to be forgiven for sin and welcomed back home to the Father's embrace would be open. Imagine how much God the Father loves you. That He would give His perfect Son to die in this way so that He could adopt you back home with Him when you make the choice to head back.

If PDAs mean the occasional squeeze of an arm or a slightly-too-long kiss, you can take or leave them. But when it comes to God's public displays of affection for you, there's no way we can brush them off. Because this is God celebrating that you are no longer dead but alive; no longer lost but found.

How do you feel about the idea of God wanting to make a fuss over you... that He is proud of you and pleased to have you with Him?

Ah yes... the story's not over yet... there is, of course, the older brother to mention. The one who wasn't happy that his brother was home, and wasn't happy at how the Father was treating each of them. The one who stayed out in the fields, away from the homecoming party.

We come back to him in vv.25-32. When it's explained to the older brother what the music and dancing is all about - that his younger brother, who'd wished their dad was dead and put distance between them all physically and in every other way, had come home again - 'the older brother became angry and refused to go in.'

Let's remember that back in vv.1-3, we read that Jesus was telling these stories to Pharisees - religious leaders who thought Jesus shouldn't be hanging out with certified sinners. By the time Jesus had finished this story, the Pharisees would have known that this 'older brother' in the story was referring to them, and their disgust at all these sinful people being welcomed by Jesus.

Often, Christians come to this story realising that 'We'd better watch that as the ones who are already 'home with God' we don't become like these Pharisees in our attitudes to other people joining us from unlikely places.' And we tend to be able to tell ourselves, 'Yeah... we're okay. We're really happy that other people are becoming Christians too, whoever they are, so we're grand here; let's move on.'

But it's time for a deeper spiritual health check now. I imagine when we went through the stuff about the younger son preferring that God wasn't there and living his life without reference to God, many of us might have felt 'Wait... there's a danger that that's me...' We're all capable of that younger brother issue: God being dead to us, putting distance between ourselves and Him, and spending ourselves on something else.

But of course, the younger brother changes his mind. He turns round, changes course, and heads home to his Father. Because in the end, he concludes that *he thinks he deserves less than he's been given, and he really values being with his Father.* When we read about the older brother, his issue is that he's got the entirely opposite view. *He thinks he deserves more than he's been given, and he doesn't really value being with his Father.* Could that be true of you, too?

Have a look at how the older brother reacts in vv.29-30 to the lavish partying that the Father is putting on. He thinks he deserves more than he has been given - and he definitely thinks he deserves more than his brother has been given.

In v.29, he points to all the things he's done for the Father whilst he's been faithfully home with Him, and complains that he hasn't been given even a smaller feast with his Dad... No, wait, that's not what he says... 'You never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate *with my friends*.'

Do you see what's in this man's heart? He's home with the Father - but he could take or leave actually *being with* his Dad. He doesn't value time and relationship and presence with the Father at all. He's no better than the younger brother was at the start of the story. He just wants what he can get from the Father, to use it with his mates. The only difference is that he is hiding the real distance between himself and his Dad by remaining 'at home.'

And he thinks he deserves more because he's there. Because of the foot he hasn't put wrong. Because of what he has done for the Father. And this belief that he deserves *more* comes out as anger, bitterness and resentment towards Dad.

Now do you see the spiritual health check that we church people need? Do you think you deserve more than what God has given you? 'God, I've done this for you... I've done that your way... I've pitched in regularly... I've prayed! I've given! I've read my Bible! I've come to church! I'm here, at your home! And what have you given me, eh? What *good* has it done me?'

'Why don't you give me what I'm asking for, for *me* to enjoy myself, or with my mates, or with my family?' How many of the things you ask God for are about things for you to have, use or share without wanting God to be there at all?

That attitude just doesn't sit with someone who is truly valuing being in the *presence* of God the Father. When that's really your heart's desire, just to *be* home with God is the biggest and best thing. Being with Him, you realise that you deserve *less* than you've been given, not more, and you *want* to be with the God who has been *so* generous to us already.

That's where the younger son ended up. That's the prize that the Father points out to the older son in v.31: 'My son, *you are always with me*, and everything I have is yours!' To be home, *with* God the Father, is the greatest

treasure we receive in this life and the one to come. When we forget that, we end up standing outside in a field grumbling.

Do you think you deserve less than you've been given by God, or more?

Do you value being with God, or not?