

Coming Home

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 4th of May 2003. The preacher is Mike Rater.

His sermon is entitled Coming Home and is based on Luke chapter 15 verses 11 to 25.

Thank you.

The Lord has spoken to us both in your Son, the Lord Jesus, and now in the word you've given us. Open our eyes and our hearts to see Jesus, to understand what he has done for us, and to love him and serve him. Amen.

I want to begin by telling you a story. You may have heard a version of this story, but the one that I know goes like this. A fellow was sitting on the sidewalk, on the pavement there, sitting in the gutter.

[1 : 2 2] His hair was greasy, he was dishevelled, his shoes were scuffed, his clothes old and dirty. He looked like what he was, a tramp who'd spent the night before underneath some railway bridge.

And there he sat, oblivious to the disapproving stares of the folk who walked by. And in his mind's eye, he went back 20 years to when he lived just around the corner in a little red brick house.

He didn't even know if it was still there. Maybe he'd been bulldozed years before. He didn't know. And he remembered riding his push bike up and down the driveway. He remembered the bougainvillea climbing up the wall.

That had been 20 years. A few years later, the push bike had become a motorbike. The pub became more of a home than the house. He got in with the wrong crowd.

And he recalled the day, as the debts mounted up, that he went home intending to ask his father for a loan. But the house was empty. And the son knew just where his dad kept all the money.

[2 : 2 0] And he took it and left. And they hadn't seen him since. They knew nothing of him. He knew nothing of them. Didn't even know if they were still alive.

They knew nothing of the years in between, the years of rebellion, the time he spent in prison. Where he'd sit in his cell and think back, often think back to the house. And think how when he got out of prison, how he would like to go back and see his folks.

Of course, if they were still there and wanted to see him. Well, he finally was released and he worked for a while. But things kept drawing him back home. Often just the sight of another kid on a push bike. Or just seeing some bougainvillea. Kicked things up, drawing him home.

And one day he decided, I'm going to go. He quit his job and set off. When the money ran out, he began to hitchhike. And then at 20 miles from home, he just stopped. He thought, hang on, hang on.

Who am I just to, after all these years, 20 years, just to bowl enough and say, Hi, Mum. Hi, Dad. I'm back. Who am I to do that? Would they want to see me?

- [3 : 21] Could they reconcile what I've become with the boy they once knew and loved? So he wrote them a letter. And it said simply, Mum, Dad, I want to come home.
- If you want to see me, just hang a little white handkerchief outside my old bedroom window. If I see it there, I'll come right on in. If not, I'll just keep on walking and you'll never hear from me again.
- And he sat there in the gutter, trying to pluck up the courage to walk around the corner and see if the house was there. Took a deep breath.
- He stood up and kept his head down, shuffled down the street, shuffled around the corner, until he came to the old plane tree where he recalled when you looked up, you could see the house. Taking another deep breath, he looked up and opened his eyes.
- The sun was shining down on the red brick house, except it wasn't red brick anymore. It was festooned with white. There were white sheets, white blankets, white pillowcases, white tablecloths, white napkins, white towels, white curtains all over the roof.
- [4 : 27] It was a snow house, a white house. His folks were taking no chances. He smiled from ear to ear, threw back his head and walked inside the house.
- Need a tissue? I've told this story a few times and I've got to say, I get a bit choked up each time. I tell them, I think partly because I put my kids in boarding school at six and a half. They were six and a half, not me.
- And so I know something of the pain of separation. So this, it kind of hits a chord with me and with us too. You've heard it before, haven't you? This sort of story, come on. If you're a baby boomer of the 1970s, you remember, don't you, Tony Orlando and Dawn?
- I thought we could sing it this morning for him, but I changed my mind. Remember that? Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree. Remember it? Should we? No, we won't sing it. It's the same, same scene, but different characters.
- This time the boy is a husband, he's been in jail, he's paroled, he wants to come home. If you want to see me, what do you do? Tie a yellow ribbon round the, sorry about that, round the old oak tree. And what do you see at the end?
- [5 : 30] A hundred yellow ribbons. So it has different versions. And I think these stories hit a chord with us. I think in part because for many of us, this is our story. A lot of us.
- I think we've been, we've been the runaway. We've been the ingrate who left home and wandered and left behind grieving parents. Or we've been the one deserted. We've been the husband or the wife or the parents who've seen their kids take off and just ruin the best years of their lives.
- And we've stayed at home and grieved and waited and prayed. We've been there. This is our story. And that's why I think they touch a chord with us. But of course, all these versions are modern versions of the original ancient story we heard this morning.
- That we call the parable of the prodigal son. Which really is the story of every person. Every man, woman and child. This is our story that Jesus is telling here. And let's hear it again briefly this morning.
- And I know you probably know it pretty well. The story of a boy, probably in his late teens, I guess. Who I think in a monumental display of greed and ingratitude and selfishness, asks his dad for his share of the inheritance.
- [6 : 40] What you normally get when your dad dies, he can't wait for that. It's basically, drop dead now dad. I want the money now. I can't hang around for you to die. I want it now. And amazingly, the father gives him.
- And the kid goes away and wastes the lot. The word prodigal means, as you know, a waster. The brother will accuse the son of spending it on prostitutes. It doesn't say that.

But that would be true to form. If he were a Melbourne kid, I guess he'd spend his days down the Crown Casino. With hundreds of thousands on the tables there. Popping ecstasy tablets. Going to rage parties.

Getting drunk. He is a creep, I think. A degenerate creep. It's then, though, in his life, that things take a turn for the worse. The money runs out.

A famine hits the land. And now, things in his life are spinning out of control. Or, I think, maybe someone is spinning things out of control.

[7 : 40] To bring him to his senses. And things get so bad, we're told he's in a foreign land, a distant land. He is a Jewish boy in a Gentile land feeding pigs.

Now, you'd have to be a Jew or a Muslim to feel the force of this picture. I know Muslims. I worked in the Muslim land for a while.

Who would literally vomit at the thought of eating food off a plate. On which before there'd been pork. They'd vomit at the thought. And for a Jew, it would just make you puke as a Jew.

Just at the thought of pigs. Here's a Jewish boy. He's come to feeding pigs. In other words, it's as bad as it could be. At which point, you may think, well, frankly, he gets what he deserves.

He's made his bed. Or, in this case, his pigsty. Let him lie in it. He's not a child. He's a grown boy. He's made his choices. He lives with the consequences. And that's how I kind of feel.

[8 : 36] I've got to say with you. I've got a little sympathy with this guy. I kind of feel good riddance. Good riddance. Because I'm not like him. I'm sure you're not either.

I wasn't like this kid. I was a good kid. I always have been a good kid. Never in trouble with the police. Never, well, back-tested mum once or twice. But I was a good kid. In fact, I was once a finalist for the Lions Club Youth of the Year.

And in a monumental act of injustice. Well, we won't go into that. I'm not like this kid.

Well, on the outside. But if I look in the mirror and strip away the facade of respectability and niceness. And look into my heart.

Am I that different? A friend of mine was talking to a woman a little while ago. She was expecting their first child. And he said to her. She wasn't a Christian. He was. He said to her. Do you know that you're a sinful person?

[9 : 37] That you're evil? And God is angry with you? And she said. How dare you say that? I'm not like that at all. I'm a good person. How dare you speak to me like that? He said to her.

I see you're expecting your child. You're looking forward to the birth of the child. Oh, very much, he said. Well, he said. Imagine when the child is born. Let's say it's a he. You carry the child for nine months.

The pain of delivery. And then finally this joy of your life is in your arms. And you nurse this child. And you give the child everything. And yet not once in his life does he ever give you one of those adoring glances.

Not once does he kiss you. He learns to walk and talk. Not once does he say thank you. Not once does he even call you mummy. I mean, you give him everything. Milk to drink and food to eat.

Self-esteem. Love. A lot. He just takes and takes and takes. Never once says thank you. Never once says in all his life, I love you. And he's not a bad kid. Keeps his room clean.

[10 : 34] Does his homework. Popular at school. But you as much as don't even exist. His own mother. And as soon as he can, he leaves home and you never hear from him again. What would you call such a child?

Oh, she said. Such a child would be a monster. He said, well then. When was the last time you said to the heavenly father who's given you everything you have?

Thank you. When did you last say to him? Father. When did you last say to him? I love you. And she said, well I've never done that.

Oh he said. Well what does that make you? And she said, I guess at a moment of blind honesty. It makes me a monster.

The average Melbournian, like the average Sydney insider, wakes up on a morning like today. Isn't it gorgeous? Breathes in largely fresh air. Normally is in good health. And goes down for breakfast.

[11 : 43] What would it be this morning? Nice bubbles. Cocoa pops. Vita wheat. Nutri-grain. And what milk? Regular milk. Light white. Soy.

Now what toast will I have this morning? High fibre. Raisin. And what butter? Margarine. I can't believe it's not butter. Enough you go to work.

A trip that would take your grandparents a day to do, you can do in half an hour. Or an hour and a half if you live in Sydney. You press a button and out spews information in a moment that would be the envy of an Aristotle or an Einstein.

And would take a monastery of hard-working monks generations to complete. It's yours in an instant. Go home, press another button and you hear the world's finest symphonies with pristine clarity.

Have a warm, refreshing shower. And then with the left-key blanket at just the right level to maximise your comfort. Lie down for a good night's sleep. And the average Melbournian thinks to himself or herself, I owe no one anything.

[12 : 58] Now that is monstrous. Bart Simpson gave grace one day.

Bart Simpson said, dear God, we pay for all this ourselves, so thanks for nothing. Well, there he sits, this boy.

Stinking, starving. And he wakes up to himself. Even his father's lowest slave at least has a roof over his head and three square meals a day. So he comes to his senses and does the hardest thing you can do.

Swallows his pride and goes home to say sorry and prepares a speech in which he'll be brutally honest. Father, I've sinned not just against you, I've sinned against heaven, against God himself.

Look, I wouldn't dare ask to be a son again. That would be, just make me a slave. So this tail between his legs, he heads back to home. At this point in the story, the focus now changes from the son to the father.

[14 : 01] Now, I don't know whether the father just happened to look up one day and see in the distance a familiar figure. Or I think more likely was keeping, as you would do, a daily vigil.

Waiting, hoping, longing, praying. But then his prayers are answered. And he sees the son and he runs out to meet him. Unless you've missed the bus, you never run, do you? You've got too much self-respect to run.

But he throws aside all decorum, tears down the street, throws his arms around the son. He says, Dad, you're straggling me. He kisses him. And the son begins his speech. But did you notice?

He doesn't finish it. He doesn't say the line, and make me one of your hard slaves. Because he sees the father wants back what he's lost.

He's lost a son. And that's what he wants back. And the father gives him a robe to wear and puts on sand on his feet and a ring on his finger. Or saying, in different ways, I love you. I forgive you.

[15 : 00] And it's great to have you back. Let's call the rails over and the neighbors will put a cow on the spit. We'll have the party to end all parties. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again.

He's lost and is found. And that's the story. And Jesus this morning, in this lovely, touching, I think powerful little story, is giving to you and me a picture of our relationship with God.

He made you. He loves you. And you belong in his company forever. Into eternity. But we've all messed it up.

Some of us fairly impressively. Like Colin. We've been outrageous sinners. Most of us, like Josh and like me. And like Paul. Respectable sinners.

Just like the average Aussie. Just ungrateful. And unthinking. But to us all, Jesus has come home. I want to say three things to wind up this morning.

[16 : 02] The first is this. This story, though I love it, doesn't begin to sound the depths of God's love for you. I think this, while a great story, is a rather sanitized account of what it really costs to have God bring you home.

In this story, the son comes back and the father says, okay, all is forgiven, come on home. It wasn't that easy with God. It wasn't a case of, well, let bygones be bygones. Jesus told this story one day on a journey.

He was going to a city. To a hill outside a city. To a cross on a hill outside a city. Where he would suffer and die.

To make it possible for you and me to come back home. That's what it costs the father to bring you home. That's how much the father loves you. We're going to sing a song in a moment about that. How deep, how deep the father's love for us.

That's what it costs for him to say to you, I forgive you, come on home. Secondly, this story reminds us of what I believe is every person's greatest need.

[17 : 09] It's not good health, happy family. It's forgiveness. Ernest Hemingway told a story, which I'm not sure is true. It may or may not be true.

But about this man and his son were having a fight at home all the time. And finally, the son left home. And the father began to search all over Spain for his son. Finally, one day in Madrid, he put an ad in the local paper.

And the ad read this. Dear Paco, meet me in front of the newspaper office tomorrow at noon. All is forgiven.

I love you, father. And he went there the next day to the newspaper office. And 800 Pacos had turned up.

Well, it is true, isn't it? That may not be, I don't know. But it is true. That the words every person deep down in their being longs to hear is all is forgiven.

[18 : 09] I love you, father. And you know that when a relationship is broken and messed up, what must take place to make it right is for the offender to say, I am sorry.

And the offender to say, and I forgive you. And people ought to know, because God seems so far away from most people, that their relation with him is messed up.

And that's why this world and most people's lives are in the pigsty's they're in. You know that from people. You get below the surface and you see all manner of tragedy and depression and stress and anxiety and broken relationships and fear.

It goes on and on and on. It's a moral pigsty. And what makes it right is for us to come back and say, I'm so sorry.

And to hear the words from the father, and I forgive you. And thirdly and lastly, this story reminds us of the amazing presumptuousness of grace.

[19 : 26] If you were to ask me, Michael, are you going to heaven? I would say to you, yes, I am. I'm going to heaven when I die. And you might say, well, hang on.

That's awfully presumptuous. I mean, who do you think you are? If you were to meet this guy in the story on his way back home and you say, where are you going, fella? I'm going back home. What do you mean?

I thought I'd go back. I've had enough time. I'm going back home now to see my dad. He said, well, who do you think you are? The way you've treated him, do you think he's going to walk on in there and say, hi, dad, I'm back. You, you ungrateful little wretch.

How presumptuous. And you'd be dead right. He would be presumptuous. Except that we've seen the father in this story who longed for the son to come home and once he saw him through his arms around him.

That's how the father, I know what the father's like. I know I'm going to heaven for this is my father who loved me and gave his son for me. I know that.

[20 : 26] Not because I'm such a great guy. Far from it. Because he's such a great God who, like any father, longs for his children to come home.

I want to say to you this morning three things briefly. First of all, you can know this morning because of the father. You can know this morning you are a son or daughter of God. You can know your sins are forgiven.

You can know that when you die you'll live with him forever in heaven. In fact, I want to say please, and I don't know any of you, you could be Christian, Buddhist, Caliph, I don't know what you are.

But I do hope you won't leave here this morning without knowing those three things for certain or wanting to know. Yes, I'm a child of God. Yes, I'm forgiven of everything I've done.

And yes, I'll be with my father forever in heaven. If you ever doubt that for a moment he's given you a sign. And it's not a white hanky fluttering outside a bedroom window or a red ribbon or a yellow ribbon around an old oak tree.

[21 : 35] It's a cross on a hill outside a city. And every time you see that cross you see the father's love and what he's done for you to bring you home.

It's a great story, isn't it? It's your story. It's a true story. I'm going to pray in a moment now. And I want you to pray to your heavenly father who made you and loved you and given you everything.

Pray in your own heart and be sure in your own heart, Father, say, I want to know today I'm your son or daughter. I want to know I'm forgiven and I want to know because you want me to know that I'll be with you forever in heaven because of Jesus.

Right now, it's just you and the heavenly father. No one else, just the two of you. Meet with him now. Close your eyes. Bow your heads. let's talk to him together.

Let's pray. Heavenly father, we have sinned. I have sinned.

[22 : 50] and I'm not worthy to be called your child. But thank you so much for the Lord Jesus who suffered and died that I might be forgiven.

Thank you, heavenly father, that by faith in him I can know I'm your child. Thank you because of Jesus that I can be forgiven.

and thank you that you want me to come home and that on that day when I pass through the veil of death you will welcome me home into your kingdom.

Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[23 : 51] Amen. Amen.