



### **THE PRODIGAL SON. (Rembrandt)**

*The story of The Prodigal Son can be read in chapter 15 in the Gospel of Luke alongside the stories of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin.*

This is a story of love and lostness, which I feel sure I first heard, as a young boy, attending Sunday School. Over the years I have heard the story so many times; hearing about the younger son's selfish greed, the older son's anger and jealousy, and the patient father's extravagant love. However, hearing a story so many times

makes it go in one ear and out the other and the story begins to lose its power. So, how can we remedy this? The best way is to try and get inside the heads of each of the sons in the story. So here goes:

**I begin with the boy who ran away.** He clearly is careless, impetuous, demanding and so very selfish. Yet, by the end of the story he is clearly very sorry for the trouble he caused and the mess he got himself into, but what I would like to ask him is, 'Was your penitence genuine? Did you mean that pious speech you composed in the pig sty, or were you just a clever talker, well versed in your father's soft spots? Did you really feel bad about your adventure, or just bad that it had failed and gone so disastrously wrong?' Another thing I would like to ask is - once you had enjoyed your party and eaten much of the fatted calf, did you get up early the next morning and pull your weight in the fields? Did you apologize to your brother? Take care of your father? Did you get it that now everything had to change and that this is just what penitence is all about?

However, here is where I need to check myself. By wanting to see tangible proof of your penitence I seem to be withholding my forgiveness of you too. I seem to be accusing you of having no empathy. I need to dig deeper. Who are you really beneath the labels of "prodigal", "sinner", "selfish"?

'Dying of hunger.' That's how the story, Jesus told, describes you. When your funds ran dry, when those so called friends abandoned

you. There among the pigs, covered in filth, you finally realized who and what you were. "Dying of hunger." I should give you a new label, and new name. you are **THE HUNGRY ONE.**

Surely, it was hunger that drove you away in the first place. This drove you away from a good life and a good father. You were hungry for freedom, self-expression, perhaps novelty? Something in you needed feeding and you took your chance. But, you could only take your chance because your father, in his vast wisdom, understood. He didn't hold you back, he just let you go. Perhaps your father knew that you couldn't return home without leaving first. That you couldn't taste resurrection without dying first. Your father respected the hunger that pulled you away. He also knew a wiser, sharper hunger would bring you home.

Your journey ended in a passionate embrace, an unrestrained welcome, overflowing joy. Not all of us experience this. Your father ran to meet you. He cared for nothing in this world so much as having you safe and snug in his arms, and yet this is not everyone's experience. I hope you know how fortunate you really are.

I do know what it is like to feel hunger. To hunger for life, for depth, for passion, for joy. I also know lostness, the lostness of being small and sorry and stupid in a world too big and unwieldy to control. I know what it's like to feel shame and I know what it's like to 'come to myself' in the broken impoverished places I create in my own heart. I still do not approve of you - the boy who ran away - but maybe we are not so different after all.

## **The boy who stayed.**

My sympathy lies with the boy who stayed. I imagine you coming home from a hot, dusty sweaty day of toil in the fields, longing for a wash in cold refreshing water, followed by a meal and then bed, only to be thwarted by a robe, a ring and a fattened calf; not intended for you. You must have been appalled with the resentment seething inside of you.

I am probably a bit like you. I am also the oldest child in my family. I am used to being the responsible one. The one who looked after my younger siblings, the one who stayed home. I am careful, I like order, and I really don't mind work. I also care about fairness a lot. I too seethe a lot. I don't confront, I seethe. Just like you. I wonder how long did your bitterness fester? How many weeks or was it months, maybe years? Did you ever wish you had left home like your brother did? Did you ever think of turning to your father and saying, 'Something in me is broken, I too am lost. Please help me, wrap your arms around me, hold me for I am full of resentment, please teach me to love.' Yet you kept silent and did not ask anything of your father. You never asked your father even for a small goat. Instead you kept quiet, perhaps thinking, If I have to ask it doesn't count.

Maybe it does. Maybe there is something essential to be learned in the asking.

*"We have to celebrate and rejoice."* This was your father's final word to you as you stood outside the house, your fists clenched,

your arms crossed, your heart bleeding. Did you know, first born son, you have to celebrate? Did you know that joy is a must in your father's house? Partying is a duty! Some lessons can only be learned as you laugh and dance. Some hearts will only be healed at the feast.

Your younger brother is inside. He's done breaking hearts for the time being. Now your father stands in the doorway waiting for you. Waiting for you to stop being lost. Waiting for you to come home. Waiting for you to take hold of the inheritance that has always been yours.

***The above owes much to an essay entitled 'Lost and lostness' written by Debie Thomas.***