

St. Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Fourth Sunday in Lent — 18 March 2007
Luke 15.11-32, 2 Corinthians 5.16-21
Revd Rob Lamerton

As we read this gospel story, there are many thoughts, experiences and feelings to which we could relate — about leaving home, separation, loneliness, homesickness — or possibly even liberation!

The story begins with a sense of liberation from family ties and responsibilities, but ends in loneliness, isolation, starvation and alienation. Its aim is to picture the outcomes of sin, isolation, and alienation from God and from those around us.

Just this week, I have had to deal with the young woman who refuses her family's help because she has become addicted to one drug or another. She has no interest in going home! I have also given food parcels to a young man who wanders because he has had no home life; he has no sense of who or where home is.

I have also talked with a very well educated and successful person for whom home and childhood are such painful memories that he has a huge emotional resistance to any connection with home.

For each of these people, the sense of pain of isolation and alienation associated with "home" is profound, and I imagine that somewhere, somehow, they will in very different ways work out what "home" means for them.

The homecoming pictured in the parable is about reconciliation with God, which is not always something we can relate to our human, family, homes.

On a happy family note, today we come to baptise Cole McLeod Phillips. It's an honour and a blessing to have Cole here, with Richard and Sharon his parents and with his godparents, for I conducted Richard and Sharon's wedding at St Paul's Manuka some years ago.

Cole is named after Cole Porter (1891-1964), the great songwriter, whose writing career extended from 1916 to 1958. Some of his songs are "Don't fence me in", "In the still of the night", "I've got you under my skin", and "Begin the Beguine". Which one connects with today's reading? Can you imagine the prodigal son skipping off into the sunset singing "Who wants to be a millionaire?"

I can see it now ... *The Prodigal Son -- the musical*, by Cole Phillips!

The story of the prodigal son is wonderfully appropriate as we gather for a baptism today and as we continue to ponder Jesus' mission for the hearts and minds of his people, especially in Jerusalem.

We are so often reminded of the great love and forgiveness of the father in the story, who represents God. But we must notice the two very different sons and the fact that the story is told to the Pharisees in response to their grumbling about Jesus mixing with "sinners" and tax collectors. We need to remember that anyone who could not fulfil the details of religious observance was considered to be a "sinner" and separated from God — far away. "Sin" was about being lost and dead and far away in a foreign land. And so we have the story of the younger son who

takes (demands) his inheritance early,
goes to a foreign country,
wastes his inheritance,

finds himself feeding pigs (which, in his culture, were unclean animals) and wants their food.

But we hear that when he comes to himself, comes to his senses, he returns to a warm and enthusiastic welcome.

Jesus' point was that even those who were separated from God could be and would be welcomed back.

Then there is the other brother, who has always been with the father; he has always been faithful, reliable, responsible, but he cannot cope with the restoration of the other brother on his homecoming.

There are those who want to wander far off, to be self-reliant, saying "Who needs God? Who needs family? ... I'll go for it! ... I'll find out the hard way!" Eventually they return to God's welcome, forgiveness and restoration.

There are those who remain, who are responsible and follow all the rules, and are obedient to family, etc., etc., but who find it difficult to accept those whose lives are riddled with mistakes and who need repentance.

The older son's failure is in not understanding the depth of his father's love and in not recognising the possibility of repentance and restoration.

St Paul says to the Corinthians, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

Sin is being lost, far away, alienated.

"For our sake," Paul says, God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Jesus enters the sin and alienation of our humanity so that we can return to our rightful place in the presence of God.