

The Silent Mother

Today needs no introduction, it is Mother's Day – celebrated throughout our land. A day of precious memories from many and a day when some will choose not to remember.

Our lectionary reading today is the story of the Prodigal Younger Son or is it the Prodigal Father or is it the Prodigal Older Brother.

There are many angles to look at this timeless story, but one which I would like us to consider today is through the eyes of a mother.

Now, who am I to even contemplate knowing what a mum would think, but I've had a mum for over 60 years and in that time I've got to know her pretty well; got to know her strengths and weaknesses, got to know what she loves and what she dislikes. She has had to deal with me both as a prodigal and also as a religious nut! But hopefully more often as a spiritual fruit!

So today, I write this sermon from the perspective of a mother because I am a son.

But I've also got a daughter with two sons and just like this unknown mum in the story of the prodigal, I see, through my daughter, her love, her care, her compassion for her two boys, wanting the best for them; there to pick them up when they fall and scrape their knees; teaching them all that's good in life. Oh yes, I am equipped to have a go at writing a letter to the two boys through the eye of a mother.

But mums forgive me if I get it wrong.

Jesus begins his story with the lovely words, *"Once there was a man who had two sons."*

He tells this story in a male dominated society. What about the mother, was she not important? Did she not have feelings? Did she not care for her boy when he ran off with the family spoils? Did she not break her heart when he was in the far country? Of course, she did! Did she not feel for the elder brother when he sulked and felt jealous of his younger brother escaping home? – Of course, she felt for him. Like Rachel in the OT, she loved them both!

Of course, Jesus is drawing theological assumptions that God is our loving Father and that's a wonderful way to look at the story, but today on Mother's Day, I want us to consider that there is a mum in this story, there has to be! She is hidden, she is quiet, she is in the background but she has thoughts and she has strength.

There is a lovely proverb, the last proverb in the Bible about a woman.
This is what it says about a good Jewish mother...

Hymn to a Good Wife

¹⁰⁻³¹ A good woman is hard to find,
and worth far more than diamonds.
Her husband trusts her without reserve,
and never has reason to regret it.
Never spiteful, she treats him generously
all her life long.
She shops around for the best yarns and cottons,
and enjoys knitting and sewing.
She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places
and brings back exotic surprises.
She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast
for her family and organizing her day.
She looks over a field and buys it,
then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden.
First thing in the morning, she dresses for work,
rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started.
She senses the worth of her work,
is in no hurry to call it quits for the day.
She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth,
diligent in homemaking.
She's quick to assist anyone in need,
reaches out to help the poor.
She doesn't worry about her family when it snows;
their winter clothes are all mended and ready to wear.
She makes her own clothing,
and dresses in colourful linens and silks.
Her husband is greatly respected
when he deliberates with the city fathers.
She designs gowns and sells them,
brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops.
Her clothes are well-made and elegant,
and she always faces tomorrow with a smile.
When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say,
and she always says it kindly.
She keeps an eye on everyone in her household,
and keeps them all busy and productive.
Her children respect and bless her;
her husband joins in with words of praise:

"Many women have done wonderful things,
 but you've outclassed them all!"
 Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades.
 The woman to be admired and praised
 is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-GOD.
 Give her everything she deserves!
 Adorn her life with praises!

So, what if this mum was to write a letter to her two boys.

To the Boy Who Ran away: This a letter to him after he was away for a few years and the mother is putting her thoughts down in a letter.

My Dear Son,

I'm writing this because we are missing you so much and we have so many unanswered questions!

My heart breaks for you! My pillow is soaking with tears. You have broken our hearts the day you walked out of our lives!

Why?

I don't understand! You had it all – everything that your father and I worked hard for was and is here for you.

But you have torn the family apart, your older brother is raging and you have left a huge scar that will not easily mend.

I find it difficult to understand for I've never run away, or squandered an inheritance, or broken my parents' hearts. We couldn't have given you more – you and your brother are the apple of our eyes. Every hour that we worked, we worked for you. You are our inheritance and everything was for you.

But we have never stopped loving you. We long for the day that we see you coming over the hill, coming home, it's our prayer morning, noon and night.

We've lost you for now but we hope that this will pass.

We pray that you will come to your senses and come back to us.

You probably don't understand how much pain you have caused us.

But one day you might, when you have your own family. God willing, you will see what it means to love and be hurt!

I'm okay with forgiving you.

Come home Son, we are waiting for you.

Your Father has grown old; your departure has put years onto him.

How are you feeling right now? What are you doing with your life? Are you happy, I hope that you are?

When your costly adventure is over, when your funds run out, please come home!

When your so-called friends abandon you, remember that we are here for you!

I can't hold the long view the way your Father does, he has not stopped believing that you will come home. I wish I could! He goes to the top of the hill every day, to see if he can see you in the distance.

If only he could, what a day that would be!

Your Father has been preparing for you coming home since the day you left. Do you know he has a calf that he has been fattening, he has in his mind the biggest and greatest party!

Oh, he loves you so much!

So, do I.

We won't judge you. What you've done is done, we only want you back with us.

I can't speak to the rightness or wrongness of your decision — I dare not — but maybe there is something in your going that I should attend to.

Have you been to the synagogue? Have you still your faith?

Come back son for your father's sake. The door will always be open but you need to take that first step.

Do you think about us? Do you remember the early days? The days when we used to go on picnics, the times that I taught you how to read and write. Do you remember when I used to hold you and play with you and we would laugh together?

Please come home son, please, for all our sakes.

If you receive this letter which I hope you will, then come home.

Your loving mum, as always.

To the Boy Who Stayed:

Dear Son,

You've been a rock to me. You've never left my side and all that we have is yours!

I think that I can understand how you are feeling. I won't lie; my sympathies lie most naturally with you. You will have so many questions, like me, why did he leave?

I can see that you are jealous of your brother. He has gone away with half of the estate and he has cut ties with us, robbed us of precious years, but you can see how your Father yearns for him to come home. You have seen your father fattening the calf and you have seen the robe and the ring laid aside for the day your brother returns.

You are the older brother and responsibility was always placed on your shoulders.

You have been responsible; you have stayed at home; and you get things done. You have always been at your father's side. You have helped him through those difficult years since your brother left home.

But I can see that you are bitter and who would blame you?

How many weeks, months, or years did you suffer in silence, mistaking restraint for righteousness? Did your father shrink as your anger grew? Did every word he spoke, every request he made, every sigh he sighed, for your brother, feel like daggers? Did you ever lie in bed at night and wish you had the courage to leave?

Or was it another kind of courage you lacked? The courage to cry? To plead? To forgive?

What would have happened if you'd looked your father in the eye and said, "Yes. I know that all you have is mine. But it's not enough. I can't fathom why, but your 'everything' is not enough for me. I can't find contentment. I can't make my way to love. In your very Presence, I am lost, even here at home."

There is no doubt that you have rightness on your side. You are right to call for justice. Right to ask why your brother's sins incurred no consequences. Right to ask why your own loyalty seems to count for so little. Right to ask why we would welcome him back.

How will you react if your brother comes home? Will you welcome him? Will you love him? Or will you harbour bitterness and hatred.

I pray that you will bury the hatchet and that you will never remember where you buried it. I love your brother as much as I have loved you. Remember, he is your brother. He is your blood.

Yes, your brother squandered his inheritance. Perhaps, by hoarding and withholding, you've also squandered yours.

I don't know why your father has never given you a young goat. Or threw you and your friends a spontaneous party. I wish with all my heart he had; it makes me angry that he didn't. Was he waiting for you to ask? Were you, in turn, waiting for him to initiate?

Son, remember that your father loves you, more than words can say. Your Father has no favourites, he loves you both for who you are his sons.

When your brother comes home, "We have to celebrate and rejoice." This will be your father's wish.

Please, I beg you, don't stand out in the cold, your arms crossed, your fists clenched, your heart bleeding. Remember, dutiful firstborn? Celebrate with us? Experience our joy to have our family complete again.

Your loving mum as always.

Now a Reflection from the boy who was lost...

Home is where the heart is.

I want... to go home.

But do they want me?

I left without a care in the world,
the world at my feet.

I had it all:

money, time, adventure.

But it hasn't worked out quite as I imagined it.

I now have nothing.

I am nothing.

I want... to go home.

What if I am rejected?

What if they hate me?
Will they recognise me?
Will they understand?
I want... to go home.
Over that hill top
is all I have ever needed.
I just did not see it.
I understand that now.
I want... to go home.
My mother, my father,
my brother, my home.
I wouldn't blame them.
This is of my making.
I want... to go home.
One foot in front of the other,
I set off into the unknown,
I am heading home,
where my heart has always been.
I just didn't know it.
But I do now.
I want... to go home.

There is a wonderful line in this amazing parable by Jesus, "when he came to his senses" and what brought him to his senses... thoughts of home.

Molly Hughes, not even 30 became the youngest woman to climb Mount Everest from the south and north sides in 2017.

She reached the South Pole in January 2020 after eight weeks and 650 hours of skiing alone in whiteouts, storm-force winds and temperatures as low as -45C.

She was recently appointed as president of Scouts Scotland, which she said was a role she intended to take on with "full force".

She was interviewed in Countryfile recently and she was asked what was it that kept you going after eight weeks alone in whiteouts, storm forced winds and temperatures as low as minus 45 degrees.

She said, what kept me going, was the thought of the hug that my mum would give me when I got back home.

I love this.

What keeps us going in life? What keeps us going in our faith?

We are not told of everything that kept the prodigal going but what we do know is that he had thoughts of home, which made him get up and leave the pigsty and travel home.

Today let us give thanks for the love of our homes, our mums, and for their encouragement, strength, wisdom and goodness. Where would we be without them.

Let us give thanks too for our spiritual homes, our churches, our Christian families. That if and when we get lost, we can always come home and receive God's love and care.

John Calvin once said, as God is our Father, so the Church is our Mother.